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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: We are back Inside City Hall. Starting tomorrow, New Yorkers who were 16 years or older will be eligible for the COVID vaccine as the city tries to increase the rate of vaccination. But the seven-day average of positive cases continues to remain above six percent and concerns remain about the different variants of the virus. Here now to talk about that and much more is Mayor de Blasio, he joins us from the Blue Room. Welcome. Good to see you, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good to see you, Errol. How are you doing?

Louis: Very well. Thank you all. Let's talk about the virus. The seven-day positivity rate is above six and a half percent. We're watching Europe go into another lockdown even as our vaccinations continue. Are you concerned about a spike in this post-Easter period?

Mayor: Well, we're watching that very carefully and I just spoke with our health care leadership just about an hour ago, and we were discussing that very concern, but I'll tell you the bigger factor right now is vaccination. There's no question in my mind, what we saw last week with over half a million vaccinations in New York City – Friday alone, a hundred thousand plus vaccinations in one day. That is how you stay ahead of the variants. That's how you beat the variants, you win the race against the variants, and that's what our health leadership has been saying. Especially now that vaccination is going to be open universally. The whole ball game is to just speed the effort to vaccinate as many people as possible, and it looks like, Errol, we're finally gaining the kind of supply we need and deserve to be able to do that.

Louis: Is your health leadership telling you that we're going to see the numbers go down in any appreciable way in the near future?

Mayor: Look, one of the things that they've learned, and I've learned is never to predict too much with COVID. We have seen all sorts of ups and downs, but I'll tell you something we know, we know to date that the vaccines are effective against the variants, and we know that the number of people being vaccinated is now skyrocketing in this city, and the supply is finally coming. I really believe that gives us the upper hand, but that said, yeah, the holiday impact can't be taken lightly. The variants can never be taken lightly. I think it's too soon to see are we on a steady downturn or not, but I really believe we're now going to very clearly meet the goal of five million fully vaccinated, New Yorkers by June, and at a certain point, you, you deprive the virus have anywhere to go if you vaccinate on that kind of level.

Louis: Okay, you announced a change today to the two-case rule in which two cases in a school would result in closure of the school, or at least temporary closure of the school. But you didn't give any specifics as to what rule will replace that one. Where do negotiations stand, and with whom are you trying to work all of this out?

Mayor: Well, first and foremost, it's the decision of our health care team, and then we do want to communicate and work with all of the unions that represent the folks who work in our schools. We've been in a dialogue with them throughout. In the next few days, we'll nail down that new approach. What we can say for sure is it's going to be more than two cases, and that's really been where the challenge has been that the current rule, although I think it made sense back in August, September, it does not make sense anymore. We've proven we can keep schools incredibly safe. I mean, Dr. Chokshi went over the numbers today at my morning press conference – 700,000-plus tests and well over, excuse me, well under after 700,000 tests, well under a one percent positivity level in our schools, the safest places to be in New York City are our schools, and now we have 65,000 school personnel who have been vaccinated. I mean, this is clearly a situation where we can keep our kids and adults in the schools safe, and we can do it with a rule that will not cause as much disruption, because that's really what it came down to. We need a more stable schedule. Parents have been really concerned about this. Kids and families need a more stable schedule, and we know once we change this rule, that we will have a lot more stability in terms of how schools stay open.

Louis: So, the United Federation of Teachers responded to your announcement by saying, and I'm quoting here: “a proclamation is not a plan.” That's what they say, and that the city can't change the two-case rule without approval from the state. Is that true? And if so, are you speaking with the Governor's team about your proposed changes?

Mayor: Look, we have been throughout this process following state guidance and the State has given a lot of latitude to local school districts to determine what makes sense, particularly when it's being dictated by the health care leadership. So, we'll present whatever the next plan is, and we'll get ready to move on it. I have every reason to believe we're not going to have a problem with the State on this, given everything we've seen previously.

Louis: Okay. So, I guess what concerns probably a lot of the viewers – my viewers right now, is that this is going to be politically negotiated rather than dictated strictly by the needs of the public health team.

Mayor: Again, I think it's going to be based on what our health care leadership has determined. They're going to determine a new rule. We know it will not be two cases. We know it will be a different construct. We'll be announcing it soon, but we do want to have respectful conversations with the folks who work in our schools and then we're going to move forward. Based on everything we've seen for months and months we're going to move forward with this and look, it's going to mean schools can be open more consistently for kids who need to be in school, that's the bottom-line while being continually safe.

Louis: Yeah, I mean like you don't have to convince me. It sounds like you have to convince Michael Mulgrew, the head of the union.

Mayor: No, I really believe in the end – and I respect him. I respect the union and all the unions. We have a number of unions who represent our school personnel, but the bottom line is we've got to do what's right for kids and families. There's been too much disruption. We've heard incessantly from parents and I don't blame them. I was a public school parent, myself, too many schools have closed, and it wasn't for a good enough reason because we have other ways to ensure safety, including again, now we have a vast number of school personnel who have been vaccinated and that's crucial to this equation. We didn't have that back in August and September. Obviously, we didn't even have the vaccine, but now we have a whole different reality in our schools, and it makes sense to create schedules that actually work for our kids and our family.

Louis: I got a viewer question on that topic, asking “why are New York City schools not offering the COVID vaccine to every student that walks through the door?” Is that a possibility?

Mayor: Well, obviously up until today, it hasn't been possible –

Louis: There's no door to walk through, right.

Mayor: Yeah, but it also hasn't been possible in terms of the ages of the students by and large. So, look, what we hope to do going forward is obviously encourage as many young people to get vaccinated as possible, for the vaccines that are available now, 16 and up, and then we're really hopeful what we're hearing is really good about vaccines being available for younger kids over the coming months. But what has been really available to us is the opportunity to get the adults vaccinated and they have responded. I want to tell you the folks who work in our schools have come out in extraordinary numbers. There's about 110,000 folks who work directly in the school buildings right now, and 65,000 school employees have been vaccinated already, and we actually think that number is meaningfully higher because we don't get all the reports of every single vaccination.

Louis: Right.

Mayor: So, I think that's a profound step forward for our schools keeping safe.

Louis: When you reach those kinds of high numbers, when you're hitting around 70, 80 percent, which is where herd immunity starts to become a factor, does it then take away some of the argument from some of the union leadership? I mean, can you then sort of be a little bit more firm and say, listen, everybody's vaccinated. The numbers are the lowest in New York. Let's go back to work and do away with all of these objections to the two-case rule and everything else.

Mayor: Look, we we've had a lot of good conversations with the unions over recent weeks. But the decision is clear – the two-case rule just doesn't make sense anymore. We want to move to a new standard that makes sense for this reality where we have now, you know, months upon months of evidence of the safety in the schools, even before vaccination was widely available and 65,000 school employees who have been vaccinated. We are convinced we'll have a better rule that'll keep schools open a lot more and be perfectly safe. I think ultimately the folks that work in the schools will see that and believe in that I really do, and we'll move forward, and the

voices of parents and families matter first here, we've got to serve them and they're saying, you know, they need something they can depend on more. We wanted to make sure parents knew this while the opt-in period was available, because it's safe to say this will be the last opt-in period of this school year up until, you know, now through June, and so we've extended it to Friday. I want to make sure all your viewers know that parents can opt in for this school year, up until Friday, and we wanted them to know that this rule was going to change.

Louis: Yeah, and there's no – I'll just confirm for viewers, there's no harm in opting in. You can always opt back out, but if you want to even consider it, you've got to do it by Friday, as of right now. Stand by Mr. Mayor. We're going to take a short break. I'll be back with Mayor de Blasio in just a moment. Stay with us.

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Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. I'm once again joined by Mayor de Blasio. Mr. Mayor, the State budget being negotiated as we speak includes two big items. We know that you support raising taxes on high-income earners. Do you also support the excluded workers fund that would channel money to New Yorkers who did not qualify for earlier stimulus payments in many cases because they were undocumented?

Mayor: Absolutely. Errol, we're talking about a half-million of our fellow New Yorkers right here in this city who are part of the life of our city. I mean, I always say, you know, you go to a grocery store, you go on the subway, you go on a bus, you know, the person next to you, you don't know their documentation status, nor should you, but you do know they're part of your community. A lot of the folks who people work with, you know, who their kids go to school with happen to not be documented, but they're still part of the life of the city and they contribute to this city, and they've gone through hell during this crisis and have not had some of the benefits available and supports available. So, I think the Legislature is doing something very important to find a way to help our fellow New Yorkers who – you know, they happen to have a different documentation status, but there's still New Yorkers. That's clear as a bell.

Louis: One of our viewers asked, do you intend to push for an increase in the City's income tax rate for households earning a million dollars or more to match the new rates in the State tax code?

Mayor: Look, I want to see the final package. I believe that those who are wealthy and, you know, they've done very, very well now for quite a while often because of government policies that favor the wealthy, then there was a huge tax cut for the wealthy under the Trump administration. And now, you know, you've seen – I think the figure I used a few weeks back, 120 New York State billionaires have increased their wealth by \$77 billion during the year 2020, during the pandemic. Let's face it, those who are doing well, just – the rich get richer all the time. So, making sure that they are paying their fair share is very, very important and to sustain everything we have to do to bring this city and state back, I want to see the final package, and then that will tell us what makes sense to do thereafter. But I really commend the Legislature, Errol. They have – there's been a real commitment. I give Carl Heastie a lot of credit, Andrea Stewart-Cousins a lot of credit, there's been a real commitment to writing this wrong and finally

ensuring that the wealthy pay their fair share in taxes. It's a real example of why elections matter – couldn't have been done for almost 50 years in this state, because of a Republican State Senate. It's finally happening now.

Louis: I know better than to try and persuade you not to continue with class warfare kind of talk, but it is worth pointing out that while those billionaires were getting rich, a lot of New York pension funds, a lot of retirees, a lot of New York workers also did better, because the stock market began to recover, right?

Mayor: Yeah, but I don't – I mean, I know you're sort of being facetious, but I want to be clear, I really don't think it qualifies as class warfare to suggest that wealthy folks pay their fair share of taxes. Again, look, I always go back to the Golden Age of this country in the post-war era – happened to be the time when wealthy folks paid the highest in taxes in the Eisenhower administration, going into the Kennedy administration, and it was when this country invested in infrastructure and education and science, and things were moving forward and there was much more shared prosperity. This is not anti-anyone, this is about making sure everyone gets a fair share. So, I really would say – you know, it's also hard to call it class warfare when you think about the massive tax break that folks just got a few years ago from Donald Trump. So, you know –

Louis: But we can't – but we can't do this in one state, right? I mean, by all indications, New York will have the highest income tax rates in the whole United States. We will be an outlier though. I don't know if the things that you're talking about – we're not going to suddenly start building new highways and doing all kinds of other wonderful stuff just because we're taxing people at a higher rate than everybody else.

Mayor: I would argue to you actually that because we're an extraordinary city and an extraordinary state where lots of people want to be from all over the country, all over the world, we know even with marginal increases in taxes, there's still going to be a huge number of people want to be here and will stay here no matter what and love this place. But beyond that, we'll be able to invest. We'll be able to invest in building a new kind of economy. I want New York City to be the public health capital of the world, that's going to take investment. I want to see life sciences take off in the city, that could be huge a number of new jobs. All of this takes investment, and infrastructure takes investment, and the one time we're going to get it, thank God for Joe Biden, something very important is going to happen with this new infrastructure bill, but that's one time we have to sustain. I think when you invest in developing your economy and your infrastructure, you actually position yourself for economic growth and sustainability. And that's actually a place a lot of business folks want to be, not – look, a lot of the states that are low-tax, their infrastructure is falling apart, they unfortunately do not have strong education systems. Look what's happened to them when their health care systems were stressed. I would argue higher, but fair taxes and lots of investment is actually the best way to have a sustainable economy that works for everyone.

Louis: Speaking of investment, Governor Cuomo has this comprehensive plan to redevelop the area in and around Penn Station. It's getting some renewed community pushback, I guess some of that was predictable. Have you studied the plan? Do you have a position on it?

Mayor: Yeah. The community pushback is well considered, I'll tell you, because, look, we have to hear the voices of communities in everything we do in this city. And, unfortunately, the Governor's plan looks like it's very friendly to developers, not so friendly to communities. I don't think that's the right way to go about things. I think we want to really respect the fact that the plans have to be about the larger public good, not about the enrichment of a few developers. And look, I want to – I'm a pro-development progressive. I want to see the right kind of development with lots of checks and balances, with lots of public benefits involved, with community voices involved. Unfortunately, the Governor's plan is not that.

Louis: On a related note – or, well, a different project anyway – a viewer asks, how does the federal infrastructure bill affect the redevelopment or the need to reconstruct part of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway?

Mayor: Well, that's a great question. I think, you know, right now we are reconsidering the whole approach to the BQE. We know there's a real challenge there. There's a lot we can do in the meantime to preserve and protect it while our transportation team puts together a new kind of proposal, and a proposal that is more forward-looking to a day when we hope there's going to be a lot less car and truck traffic in New York City. But the infrastructure money certainly offers the opportunity to, as that new plan is put together, there'll be something to actually pay for it, because this was never going to be cheap, and the City was going to be left holding the bag for a lot of it otherwise. So, I think the infrastructure plan is going to be one of the reasons why we can finally fix the BQE.

Louis: I mean, money wasn't really the limiting factor, right? I mean, it was trying to figure out in very specific logistical terms whose neighborhoods should be inconvenienced while the reconstruction takes place?

Mayor: I want to make sure it's clear to you and all your viewers, money was a big factor too. It was not what we were talking about in the first instance, but it was going to be a big factor over years. This was going to be a very costly project by any estimation. So, to your question, does the infrastructure money help ensure they can happen? Yes. Regardless of whatever else is happening, it gives us some guarantee there'll be available resources. But I think you're right in the first instance, the first thing we need is a plan that makes sense for the long-term. And we do want to ask from scratch now – really, sort of, start over – that's what our Commissioner, Hank Gutman is doing now – how do we do a plan that both preserves the BQE, but thinks about it in the future? Not based on the way it was done in the past, but in the future where we really do want to get more and more people in mass transit, reduce car traffic a lot, have a very different kind of city.

Louis: Okay. We've only got one minute left, but a viewer wanted to know, do you have a plan to help foster entrepreneurship in the cannabis industry here in the city? There are a lot of entrepreneurs already, as we know. However, with legalization, it reframes the question in some ways.

Mayor: Yeah. The quick answer is, yeah, that's something we're going to work on, because it's what I pushed very hard years ago in Albany, to ensure this legalization focused on communities and investment in community-based businesses. And there is some – there's some very good elements to this law that will help us do it, but we have to push hard for a local voice in the implementation. That's still not a hundred percent clear, but there's going to be a whole regulatory process, that's where I think we can make an impact to ensure that resources flow to local communities for local jobs, local businesses. That that would bring real justice.

Louis: Okay. We're going to leave it there for now. Thanks very much for your time. We'll see you next week, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Take care, Errol.

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