

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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 26, 2021, 11:05 AM

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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON
THE BRIAN LEHRER SHOW**

Brian Lehrer: It's the Brian Lehrer Show on WNYC. Good morning again, everyone. Time now for our weekly Ask the Mayor segment, Fridays at the 11 o'clock hour – my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio at 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0, or you can tweet a question, use the hashtag, Ask the Mayor and we will not miss it. Good morning, Mr. Mayor. Welcome back to WNYC. Whoops. Do we have the Mayor?

Mayor Bill de Blasio: That's my mistake. I was on mute. Good morning, Brian, how you doing today?

Lehrer: Unmute yourself, Mr. Mayor, unmute yourself.

Mayor: I know that's the bane of this whole period of history is the mute button. So, I figured it out today.

Lehrer: Let's begin on unmuting Broadway, where you're hoping for stages to reopen in September. What's the plan?

Mayor: Well, look, I'm really excited about bringing Broadway back, Brian, and I think it's going to be one of the things that is going to be most energizing for the city and create the most sense of hope and possibility. We love theater in New York City. We need it back – about a hundred thousand people work in the theater community, and we're going to start vaccinating the Broadway community starting next month in April, and it helps the theaters determined the best way to handle bringing crowds in and out. When people come back, September is the target date. We're working with the Broadway community of some shows might even be able to start earlier, but a lot of them need a lot of lead time cause of rehearsals and, you know, designing sets, et cetera. But we think this is going to be a key part of New York City's comeback. We need some help from the State, as per usual, clarifying their rules or granting us the local right to do it ourselves, which I would strongly prefer. But look, I think this is going to be amazing and certainly six months from now, and remember that September is, you know, six months away. We believe the health situation in the city will be so greatly improved that will really facilitate this. I fully expect to get five million adults vaccinated by June and then even a hell of a lot more people vaccinated by September and be ready to reopen broadly.

Lehrer: Well, if you did have control rather than the State, what rules would you impose for a safe Broadway theater reopening?

Mayor: Well, for example, we think that mask wearing makes a lot of sense. Obviously, actors are a different matter, but for the folks in the audience, that's a good requirement. We think having a very clear delineated plan for identifying if people have been vaccinated or have been tested negative in the preceding three days is a great way to facilitate audiences and having the kinds of sizes of audiences that Broadway needs to come back because they have to have a full theater to make it viable. Obviously, we're also going to help them with rapid testing on-site as needed. So, we just want all of these rules clarified like every other industry for Broadway to start making major investments and putting things in motion. They need as much clear as possible and that's what we want to get done for them.

Lehrer: So there's that, and you made news this week with your announcement that you'll start requiring municipal office workers to return to their desks beginning in May staggered, but last week you were on the show, basically accusing Governor Cuomo of murder for reopening things too quickly at this time with too many unknowns about the variants. So, are you sending mixed messages by calling city workers back to their desks?

Mayor: Not at all, and I did not accuse him of – Brian, come on – that's not what I said. I said it was a mistake to make any of the decisions about reopening for political needs and obviously his political needs are vast right now, and the decision around the fitness classes, our health team here deeply disagreed with that. That's what I was talking about. Making a decision where you're talking about folks who are in small spaces, indoors either some cases without masks on other cases with masks on, but they will get wet by definition and that compromises them. I mean, this is the kind of thing our health care team has said. There's no reason to be doing this now, and that's the kind of decision, I think, did not make sense. Having city workers come back into highly controlled settings that are part of the government where we can mandate a whole host of health and safety measures and stick to them as an entirely different matter, and I think it's good for getting the work of the people done and for bringing the city back.

Lehrer: One more thing on that, then we'll go to some calls. We had, on yesterday's show, Henry Garrido, the president of the biggest municipal workers union, DC 37, and he said, one concern is that members of the public be required to wear masks when they come into city offices to do whatever business. Will you require that?

Mayor: Oh yeah. I think that makes total sense. We want to protect everyone, and you know, one of the things our health team, Dr. Varma, Dr. Chokshi, Dr. Katz have been saying from the beginning is don't think about taking off our masks until, you know, at least June, if not later. This has been part of why we've been able to hold the line of this city and we've got to stick with it. So, I definitely want to see masks on our employees, and I want to see masks on the folks who come seeking their help.

Lehrer: George in Queens, you're on WNYC with Mayor de Blasio. Hi George.

Question: Good morning, gentlemen.

Mayor: Good morning, George.

Question: Good morning. My question is regarding housing and the housing lotteries and the affordability. I work as a social worker. I make around \$60,000 year, but I find that some of the exclusive neighborhoods on the housing lotteries use AMIs over 130 percent or higher and don't really seem to be affordable. I'm looking at Union Square, for example, at the moment, apartments begin at \$2,500. There are about 337 apartments at Five Points, all of which begin at \$1800, three-fourths of which begin at \$2,300. So, I'm just wondering why this is even considered affordable housing, because I thought Housing Connect was intended for the purpose of providing affordable housing for everyone, and integrating neighborhoods, mixed incomes homes, et cetera?

Mayor: So, George, first of all, please give your information to WNYC and I'd like the folks from Housing Connect, talk to you and make sure that we're maximizing all the options you're seeing, because there's a huge number of affordable apartments that keep coming online constantly, and you know, the typical affordable housing in this city is at the income level you're at and below. There are definitely some that are higher, but I want to remind you when we talk about affordable housing, it is for a range of, you know, working people, lower-income people, it's a range. I want someone who's a public servant and there's plenty of public servants making the amount of money you make or more you know, a custodian, a firefighter, a teacher, a nurse. I want them to have affordable housing in New York City too. So, there is a reason why there's some affordable housing for folks at your income level or above because they're still working people and it's still hard to afford New York City. But most of the affordable housing is at your income level and below, and certainly want to make sure you get to see all the options that are available. I've met so many people who got affordable housing through the initiatives that we created back in 2014. That's now going to be – when it's done, we'll have created 300,000 affordable apartments. That's enough for something like 700,000 New Yorkers to have long-term affordable housing. A lot of people are now benefiting from it. It's really coming into its own. We want to make sure you're able to benefit as well.

Lehrer: I guess part of his question is a policy one having to do with why there would be any place, even if they tend to be higher income areas in the private housing market, where there would be city subsidies for much higher incomes than his?

Mayor: Well, I want you to not assume city subsidy, because the way we do this, and again, Brian, this is a plan we put forward in 2014 and I would urge everyone to look at how it works because it's been very successful. A lot of it is preserving apartments that are already existing, but we're about to fall out of affordability and preserving them in place as affordable, and typically rent-stabilized, and then another part of it is where new development is occurring requiring that developers create affordable housing. That's what we did with mandatory inclusionary housing and a bunch of other policies – it's literally saying you cannot develop your

new building unless there's a share of it that's affordable housing, and that share depends on the level of affordability we're reaching. If we are reaching very low-income folks that's obviously something I want to do as much as possible. Sometimes that means there's fewer apartments, but we want to make sure there's a lot of apartments for very low-income folks, but we also want apartments for working class people. So, those are all over the city, and the policy is to maximize affordable housing. Look at the SoHo rezoning we're talking about now. An area that has very little affordable housing, it's been way too exclusive. This rezoning is going to create about a thousand affordable apartments, and that's going to be a big deal in that community. So, this is, this is exactly what we've been trying to do all over the city.

Lehrer: Andre in Manhattan also has a Housing Connect question of a different kind. So, I'm going to take him next, Andre, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi there.

Question: Hi there. Good morning, gentlemen. How are you?

Mayor: Good. How are you doing Andre?

Question: Okay. My [inaudible] is that I have applied on Housing Connect probably from the onset, and I applied for about 90 different apartments. I'm a multiple disabled senior that needs low-income housing, and I'm living in a situation where it's unaffordable for me, and I want to know what I can do in regard to housing then?

Lehrer: Andre, did you tell our screener that you've been on the waitlist for three years and nothing has come up?

Question: At least, yes, I've been given these ticket numbers or tag numbers, whatever they're called and they're astronomical. I mean, there's not much of a chance for me to be accepted to the housing that I applied for.

Lehrer: Andre, thank you. Mr. Mayor, is that typical? First of all, that long a waitlist?

Mayor: No. I mean, a long time, because even though, as I said, we're creating affordable housing for 700,000 New Yorkers in the city of 8.5 million. That's really great, except the need is even greater. So, a wait list time of even several years. Yes, we do, of course, experience that sadly, but what's concerning me here is Andre mentioned that you have to have disabilities. Folks with disabilities get a preference in affordable housing, and so it's surprising to me that he would be on the waiting list that long and I'd like us to cut through it. Andre, please give your information that WNYC, I'll have someone call you today. Given everything you told me, I would think we have a pretty good chance of finding you something in the near term. So, let's see if we can help you right away.

Lehrer: All right, Andre, hang on. We'll take your contact information and Erin in Woodside, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Erin.

Question: Hi, thank you for taking my call. I wanted to – I know that – first, I wanted to thank the Mayor for all the efforts he's made to get students, as many students as possible, into New York City public school classrooms. They know a lot of the situations haven't been perfect, but I also know that a lot of good things have been happening in classrooms. So, I thank you. But I also wanted to use this platform to call attention to an issue that's been completely under the radar and that's that New York City charter school students, many of them have not had the option to set foot in a classroom for over a year, and these schools were created to serve and support many of the most vulnerable communities, and I feel like they've served children with special needs, English language learners, children from underprivileged communities, and I worry so much about these schools that they're in areas where parents feel marginalized and feel powerless to make changes. I'm concerned that these schools are run by leaders who appear to be made to be able to make decisions unilaterally like heads of private companies. But, you know, the problem is they're making those decisions that affect how taxpayer money is being used and they affect a lot of vulnerable people, and nobody's talking about it.

Lehrer: Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Yeah, Erin, this is really important what you're saying, and I'm really glad you're raising it. First of all, thank you for what you said at the beginning about our efforts to get more and more kids back to school, and I do want to give you an update, Brian, this is some breaking news for you, that as of 5:00 pm yesterday, we had almost 25,000 kids already signing up to opt back in. So, this is just after literally, that was after two days of the opt-in process. So that's, to me a real interesting sign about the energy of parents and kids who want to come back to our schools and that process is going to go until April 7th. So, a reminder to all parents, you know, who are considering opt in, you have until April 7th, obviously we assume this is the last opt-in opportunity of the year, and any parent who wants to opt in can go to schools.nyc.gov to do that. But to Erin's point, the larger point, it's a very important discussion that we should have. Again, we had a very vibrant discussion in 2013 in the mayoral campaign about what made sense for charter schools and traditional public schools going forward, and I agree, I think that the decision to go all remote that many of the charter networks did was a mistake. But I agree with Erin's point, they have the ability – the way State law works – they have the ability to make that decision independently, I think there should be more accountability.

Lehrer: Even though they are public schools technically using public tax money as Erin points out. On the number that you just announced regarding opt-ins, 25,000, I don't have this stat in front of me, maybe you know it, but isn't it something like 700,000 students whose families had chosen all remote learning for them so far. So, if so, what does that 25,000 represent?

Mayor: Well, it represents two days of a 14-day opt-in window, and I don't want to conjecture, you know, sometimes when you do something like an opt-in, it's very intense in the beginning and then trails off, other times people really focus only in the last few days when there's a deadline and you see big numbers at the end. I can't tell you what the trend line will be. I can tell you that 25,000 kids in two days certainly means something in terms of the real interest and we'll be able to serve 25,000 more kids with in-person education, and that's a big deal. We, as New Yorkers, Brian, we're a little bit jaded about numbers because everything around you is so big, to me, it makes my heart really feel good that 25,000 more kids will get the benefit of in-person education in April and May and June, and I think it will help prepare them for next year. But I think a lot of parents are going to want to come back, and then I absolutely believe, you know, there'll be hundreds of thousands of kids who are not ready and their families are not ready until September. I think we'll see that too, but we're glad that we can thanks to the new CDC rules, give parents this opportunity.

Lehrer: And one other education question, because you announced this week expansion of 3-K public school to all school districts, but not enough seats for all three-year-olds whose families want in. So how will parents need to apply or to compete for those slots for fall?

Mayor: Yeah, that's a great question. Well, I'm so proud that we could now bring 3-K to every one of the 32 school districts in New York City. I mean, this is a dream that I've had for years, and it's finally going to be real this September 2021. The fact is we're adding 15,000 3-K seats. So compared to what we have right this minute in our schools, we'll have 15,000 more seats in September, parents in every single district will be able to apply. As you said, there's not yet a seat for every child, that's still a year or two away when we can make it fully universal. But again, I'm just going by the sheer impact on New York City families, 15,000 more kids are going to get 3-K, 15,000 more families are going to benefit. It's going to be for free. It's going to be high quality, early childhood education. It just changes kids' lives. So yeah, it's going to take a few jumps to get to 100 percent universal, but a whole lot of families are going to benefit in real time this year.

Lehrer: Thomas in the East Village, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi Thomas.

Question: Hello, Mr. Mayor, thanks for making yourself available. I'd like to ask you about the East Coast Resiliency Project as it relates to the East River Park, particularly the destruction of the park by covering it with eight feet of fill and in the process killing all the mature trees. There previously was a – and hopefully still has a better plan – the original berm that would run along the FDR to keep the areas from flooding. Is this new plan on course, or is there any chance we could save the park and return to the original plan?

Mayor: Thomas, thank you for the question. I know, you know, I've spent time in the park. I spent time talking to folks who have strong views on this and the community. We really felt that the new plan was going to be much stronger. It's just going to provide better, more real and lasting resiliency for a neighborhood that you know, was hit very hard by Sandy, and the entire

park will be restored. In fact, when all is said and done, there will be more trees, and I've been over this with folks who's concerned about trees, I have too. And I certainly get the point about mature trees versus new trees, but I truly believe this is what's in the long-term interest of the city and the community to do this right the first time and to really make sure it is resilient in every way, including everything that's underneath the park. That's part of the infrastructure of the city, but I guarantee that we are very sensitive to the tree issue. They will be brought back. Trees will be brought back in even greater number. It will be a real disruption to the community. I don't want to sugarcoat that. I do feel for people on that point and we're going to provide as much as possible alternative recreation options for the community, but I really think this is about the long-term, and in the long-term this is the better plan.

Lehrer: Frederick in Kew Gardens, a city worker, he says, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Frederick.

Question: Good morning, Brian. Good morning, Mayor. I want to preface my comments by saying that I'm really excited that at some point I'm going to be back in offices working with my coworkers, but I want to say that, especially after you said about Governor Cuomo, that these shouldn't be made for political purposes. The dialogue around this discussion feels like it's being made for the benefit of real estate, bringing office work – showing that like office workers should be back in these spaces and not out of scientifically grounded, best interests for the employees and the City of New York and to reduce the spread of [inaudible] new variants that may not respond to the virus. That's my comment. Thank you, Brian, for taking my call.

Lehrer: Thank you very much.

Mayor: Thank you.

Lehrer: And for listeners, context on this, Mr. Mayor, I would just add that –

Mayor: Yeah, please.

Lehrer: The commercial real estate industry has been pushing you to do this, bring city office workers back as quickly as possible to signal to all their tenants in their private Manhattan office buildings that they should go back and presumably keep those office buildings, rents, and property values high. So, why shouldn't somebody see this as more pro landlord, less pro-worker of a mandate?

Mayor: Yeah, well that's with all due respect, Brian, that's really reductionist. The real estate industry was pushing that months and months and months ago. And I said, when we believed it was the right thing to do, and the safe thing to do is when we do it. And for months, I said, we're not ready yet. We decided health care team and I, at the time I did my State of the City remarks

that we would be ready by May. I gave the State of the City in January and we said, it's going to take till May, but by May, we are convinced we could do it right. And with all the health and safety measures, and you've seen with our schools, when you layer on masks and distancing and proper ventilation and all the other measures of cleaning, you can keep an environment very, very safe, and we can do that in our public offices.

But to Frederick's point, and I appreciate that Frederick prefaced with his excitement of coming back to work, and I appreciate your work as a public servant Frederick, we know we're going to get more done for people if folks are back in our offices. I can say that about City Hall. I can say that about every place. That they're having folks come back and person is going to make our work better, and we're here to serve people and it's time to do it because we can do it safely. That is a far cry from what the State did, for example, with the fitness classes, which again, the doctor said wholesale, that makes no sense. That's a mistake. That's dangerous, versus a public office setting where you can really control the environment, put all sorts of public health and safety measures into place, and do it the right way. We don't get to control what happens in an individual fitness class. We sure as hell do get to control what happens in our own public offices. So, I really think there's a world of difference here. We're going to do this in a way that's safe. And if anything changes in the overall environment with COVID, you know, on everything, we're going to keep reassessing and make decisions based on the data and the science.

Lehrer: How much permanent remote work do you plan to allow for city workers who have shown they can be as productive from home and prefer that option. Henry Garrido, the union leader for city employees, said on the show yesterday that in many cases the workers have been more productive from home. So, I guess the question is how much will you make permanent the option of – for some of them to do that, if they can do their jobs from home?

Mayor: Yeah, that's an important question, Brian, it's one we're looking at carefully. I would say, you know, we're open to some flexibility going forward, but it has to be done very carefully. I do agree there's times when people can be very productive from home, but I think overwhelmingly our experience has shown that people are most productive and most collegial, when they're in-person. I think a lot gets lost in translation in remote work. So, and again, our customers, the people in this city are going to want to do a lot of the things in-person and talk to a real human being in-person. That's a lot of the work that happens in our offices about serving people in need. So, you know, I want to be careful about that. I don't have a blanket statement for you. I will say, we're going to look at it, and we're open to some new approaches. But there's a world of difference between what can be done in-person and what can be done remotely. I still think that's important to keep front and center.

Lehrer: I'd like to ask you about an aspect of the police reform package passed by City Council yesterday, it includes ending immunity from personal damages lawsuits against police officers. As individuals, they would now be able to be sued. You spoke against that provision previously on the show and elsewhere, but you say Council improved it to the point that you will sign the bill. What changed your mind and what changed in the bill?

Mayor: Well, I think the way you defined it, I wouldn't define it the same way. We took away individual financial penalties for officers because I thought that was a huge mistake and what it would do, you know, in a time when we are trying to get more and more working people and people of color and immigrants to join the NYPD and diversify the NYPD, I truly believed if there was going to be a message to people that they might be personally liable, that, you know, for potentially tens of thousands of dollars, that that was going to tell a whole lot of people this was not a job they could pursue. So, we took it away from the concept of personal, individual financial liability. The liability would be on the city. And we aligned the bill to the House legislation, the George Floyd Act, which addresses qualified immunity, but in a way that doesn't fall as a personal, individual financial penalty to officers, and I this is a much better way to do it. So, that's why I'm supportive.

Lehrer: Oh, that's my error of misunderstanding then, because I thought the whole point of ending qualified immunity was so that the individual officers could be sued as individuals. So, what changed at all in this –

Mayor: Again, respectfully, the origin - some of the origin of this – came from the federal legislation, the George Floyd Act, and the original proposal at the city level did not align to the federal legislation. And what we said is we should really track what is a profound reform. The George Floyd Act passed the House. We're hoping and praying that we'll pass the Senate. We should track exactly that concept. It makes it easier if someone has a concern to bring a legal action, but it does not put the individual, financial penalty on the officer. It puts it on the Department and the City, and that's what I was comfortable with.

Lehrer: So, you're not ending it – right, so you're not ending it.

Mayor: But no, it's still ending. The reason the one speaks about it in terms of qualified immunity is the legislation does make it easier, in some cases, to bring a legal action. It reduces some of the barriers to legal action. But, again, I wouldn't mistake, in my opinion, Brian, I'm not saying – I'm not a lawyer, I'm not an expert, but I wouldn't say it's not ending qualified immunity if you take away the individual penalties to officers. I would say the central concept was ensuring that people had legal recourse and this legislation does that, but in a way that I think is better for making sure that we can still have a diverse, strong police force, and at the same time, give people the right to pursue a whatever redress they're trying to achieve.

Lehrer: All right, we have about a minute left. Last question. The State Budget is due by next Thursday and it looks like they may pass legalizing recreational marijuana, maybe before that, do you see the Governor's scandals weakening his position in budget negotiations in any way that would likely affect the city for better or worse?

Mayor: Well, first of all, it's great that there will be an action to legalize cannabis. I want to make sure it's done in a way that respects the rights of localities and really empowers economically the communities that were most hurt by the previous drug laws. I think this bill goes a long way. I think there's more to do after, but it goes a long way. As to your question, I think the legislature is empowered, Brian. I think what's happening here with the Governor's many, many scandals, is the legislature is getting more and more power. And I, I have a lot of faith in Carl Heastie and Andrea Stewart-Cousins, and I think the legislature leading the budget process more strongly is going to be good for the State and good for the City.

Lehrer: Thanks as always, Mr. Mayor, have a good weekend. Talk to you next week.

Mayor: Thank you. Take care now.

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