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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. As we begin this holiday week, New Yorkers are being told to curtail family gatherings, ideally to avoid those gatherings altogether, if possible. But the long lines of people waiting to get tested might indicate that many people are still planning to gather and just want to make sure that they can test negative. Officials say that as positive test rates rise, the entire city could be declared an orange zone. That would mean the closure of non-essential businesses and an end to indoor dining in those areas. Joining me now to discuss that and much more is Mayor de Blasio. He joins us from the Blue Room inside City Hall. Welcome Mr. Mayor. Good to see you.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Thank you, Errol. How you doing today?

Louis: Just fine thanks. I wanted to ask you about this three percent rate that of tests, of positive tests that led to the closing of the schools. Well, one, something we've noticed in the last few days is that it obscures some really important differences between different neighborhoods. So rather than focus on the three percent, I wanted to ask you what are the areas of the city that are of most concern right now?

Mayor: Errol unfortunately, it's more and more areas of the city. I mean, even compared to just a few weeks ago you know, for a period of time, obviously a part of Brooklyn, a part of Queens, then that started to get better. We saw a problem in Staten Island start to emerge. Now, unfortunately, as you heard from the Governor today, Staten Island is one-part yellow zone, one-part orange zone. We've got a piece of Queens, that's still an area of concern now, a new area of concern. Some of that old Brooklyn cluster is still an area of concern. Now, a part of the Bronx, a part of Northern Manhattan. So unfortunately, as you see from the daily ZIP code data, we've seen that trend here, a pretty consistent trend. And it's time for every New Yorker to really understand that what we do matters. I need to get everyone in the game now. Everyone off the bench, in the game to fight back this second wave. Because we have proven the ability to fight against the coronavirus in a way that really surpasses almost any place in the country. But it's now got to be everyone's business to fight back this second wave.

Louis: Are you encountering an attitude for lack of a better word, fatalism? Where people just assume there's going to be a complete shutdown, so they might as well go out, have a couple of meals, have a couple of drinks and enjoy it while they can?

Mayor: I wouldn't say that from the variety of evidence that I'm seeing from people I've talked to, but also the way we're seeing people comport themselves Errol. I think there's a lot of fear

that there will be more restrictions coming. And I've been really honest about the fact that just look at the numbers, we are going to end up in an orange zone soon. But I tell you the vast majority of New Yorkers have been very good about the masks. Arguably that's gotten better. And that's why I really want to see people double down on that. I think the big issue, that sort of moment of truth is the holidays. Are people going to avoid travel? So far they, you know what we're hearing from the airlines, the airports, is a lot fewer people flying, that are planning to fly at this moment. I want to keep saying to everyone, please, unless you absolutely positively must travel, avoid travel. All we're talking about is this holiday season. By next holiday season, we know the vaccines will have been well distributed. We'll be in a much better situation. So please, if you don't have to travel, don't. If you're staying here either have a small gathering or a virtual gathering. Practice the distancing, wear the masks. This is going to be crucial Errol because how we come out of Thanksgiving and whether we have an increase in the spread or we keep it fairly modest, is going to have so much to do with what happens in the rest of December into January.

Louis: What do you do about cases of deliberate non-compliance? And I don't mean one or two cases here and there. But when you see even public officials basically saying, they're not going to comply, they're going to have a big gathering at their house. They, you know, they're skeptical about everything they're hearing from both the City and the State. What does that mean for the rest of us?

Mayor: I think the vast majority of New Yorkers are not skeptical at all. They've lived this painful reality. They lost loved ones. They saw the pain that COVID has created. I think the vast majority of New Yorkers get it. I think in terms of your point, what we need to do is, you know, with the larger gatherings, we continually shut them down and provide real penalties. We got to keep enforcing the message about not traveling, about keeping a family gathering small and safe. I think the vast majority of people are listening. And I'm never surprised when a few people try and stand a part Errol. But in the end, the reason New York City came back in the spring was the vast majority of people took the rules seriously and brought them to life. And we did something you remember it – I mean, it was miraculous how far back we came. I think most people are going to do that again now.

Louis: There was a report, I think it was in the New York Post with a photo, of what was purported to be a wedding of, one of the grandsons of one of the most important rebbes in Williamsburg. Thousands of people at a location right next to a firehouse. And it seems like it just kind of came and went and nobody noticed. And there've been no summonses or consequences of any kind. Do you have any information about what happened there?

Mayor: Well, we know there was a wedding. We know it was too big. I don't have an exact figure, but whatever it was, it was too big. There appeared to be a real effort to conceal it. Which is absolutely unacceptable. There's going to be a summons for \$15,000 immediately for that site. And there could be additional consequences quite soon as well. That's just not acceptable. I mean, we've been through so much. And in fact, the Williamsburg community in recent weeks responded very positively, did a lot more testing and was being very responsible. This was amazingly irresponsible, just unacceptable. So there's going to be consequences right away for the people who let that happen.

Louis: For New Yorkers who do decide to travel, do you want or expect them to be tested upon their return?

Mayor: Yeah. I mean, look, this is another area where you're going to see more enforcement. We are going to make it very vivid on the need to quarantine when you come back from travel. Unless you do exactly what the State has delineated, which is get a test while you're still away, and it's a negative test, come back and after a few days, get another negative test. That would allow you not to quarantine. Otherwise you are, if you leave town and you come back, you are doing 14 days of quarantine. I think with the exception of a few of our neighboring states as a destination. You're doing 14 days of quarantine. We're going to be checking on people constantly. And if people don't follow the quarantine, there will be substantial financial penalties. And we're going to make that very vivid. Because again, this is not – this isn't abstraction. This second wave is right at our throat right now. And we can do something about it. But people have to be just as strong and responsible as they were in the spring. Remember a vaccine is coming and coming soon Errol. We didn't use to be able to say that. Now we can say it. We just need to get through this last stretch and link up to when a vaccine starts to arrive and we can really get out of this once and for all. But if people are not focused, we could be spending months in restrictions when we didn't have to.

Louis: And as far as places to get tested I made note of what I saw over the weekend, which were really long lines in Boerum Hill on Atlantic Avenue, stretching all the way around the block for one particular CityMD. But there are lots of places I'm hearing you say that are free and have no lines. What's the best way for people to figure out where they can go get a test and maybe avoid some of these lines?

Mayor: Just call 3-1-1 or go online to the City website. And you know, you're exactly right Errol. You go to one of our public facilities, Health + Hospitals 11 hospitals, 70 clinics, pop-up sites, consistently less lines, fewer lines, quicker service. It's free. I've gone many times. Very, very good supportive folks there. So yeah, there's real lines, especially with the holidays coming. If you want to avoid those lines, pick up the phone, call 3-1-1 and go to one of our public sites.

Louis: Okay. In our last minute before the break, there's talk about coming up with a different methodology to figure out how to reopen schools. Is that going to involve changing the use of say the three percent threshold? Or are you going to develop a brand new measure?

Mayor: This is now switching over to the State standard which is what happens when you have an orange zone, where you're required to have a pause in your schools while everyone is tested in the school community. People who test negative can come back. And then there's regular testing from that point on. It's a very delineated approach. It's very rigorous. We're going to apply it. And we're going to start with our special education schools, our District 75 schools. Then focus on pre-K, 3K and work our way up into elementary schools. We're going to try and phase this in over a matter of days and weeks and get as many schools back as possible.

Louis: Okay. Very good. We've got some non COVID stuff to talk about. Standby, Mr. Mayor, we're going to take a quick break here. I'll have more to discuss with Mayor de Blasio in just a minute. Stay with us.

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Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. I'm once again joined by Mayor de Blasio. He's in the Blue Room inside City Hall. And Mr. Mayor wanted to ask you about where things stand with the City budget. The bill is coming due. Obviously, we knew this moment would arrive when there's going to be a lot more expenses than revenue, and the question of furloughs and layoffs of City workers becomes unavoidable. What's the plan? Because under even the best-case scenario, we may not get relief from Washington in time for this next budget round. Right?

Mayor: Well, it's a good point, Errol. Look, let's first say thank God for the support we have gotten from Washington so far, even though it hasn't been perfect. What we revealed today from an OMB analysis, \$40 billion impact on our local economy on direct aid to New Yorkers, the direct stimulus checks, the unemployment benefits, the PPP benefits for small business, and that had also an impact on the City budget. Some of that ended up being revenue that was then passed along to the City as well. That helped, the additional FEMA aid that finally came in helped. That's what's keeping us as strong as we are right now, and the fact that about 300,000 jobs have come back. And it's real important, Errol. We lost 900,000 jobs, terrifying number of jobs, March, April, and thereafter, but now 300,000 of those jobs have been recovered. That is helping us too.

So, in terms of your point, yes, I believe we're not going to see a stimulus until Joe Biden is president. The next time we have to present our preliminary budget is ahead of that. And we're going to have to talk about the kinds of measures that we'd have to do going forward that are dire – I don't want to see layoffs. I've made it really clear, but at a certain point, if we cannot get federal relief, that's one of the only things we have left. A lot of our partner unions have worked with us to avoid that for this year so far, thank God. But next year, looking at a \$4 billion deficit right now for the next fiscal year, that could get a lot worse if there's no stimulus. This is why we're going to fight really hard to get this stimulus done quickly.

Louis: As a general proposition, if you are putting off expenses, meaning getting agreements from the unions that you'll defer some payments to them, which I think has been happening almost to the tune of close to three-quarters of a billion dollars, those aren't real savings. In some ways, it's almost like a form of borrowing against the future, right?

Mayor: Well, they're real savings for this year's budget. Of course, we have to pay it next year. No one's saying anything but that, but I want to be careful on the way you talk about it, because really the question is what kind of federal stimulus are we talking about? If we're talking about a federal stimulus that actually addresses the extent of the problem, we're going to be in very good shape then, being able to pay what we need next year. And what we would have done then was key people in their jobs, keep families with a livelihood, keep the essential services flowing to New Yorkers, speed up our recovery. That's why we did all this, but if we don't get a big enough stimulus, of course you're right, we have to pay that next year and that's part of why that deficit is very serious next year.

Louis: Are there attempts underway to create true efficiencies, true savings, real shrinkage, frankly, of government in order to deal with this?

Mayor: Yeah. Absolutely. I mean, first of all, we announced \$1.3 billion of additional savings beyond that three-quarters of a billion you talked about. We announced \$1.3 billion in additional savings in this November plan. The size of government is getting smaller, there's no question about it. There's a lot of roles we're not hiring for anymore. On top of that, obviously, we took a furlough for managers. I did, and a lot of other leaders and managers of City government took that furlough. That's also an option for the future. If we had to apply that to the workforce, no one wants to, but it's an option. So, yeah, there's all sorts of things that are happening already tightening our belts. But remember when you're tightening your belt, there often is a result and impact, and if it means less services for people in the middle of a time where there's such tremendous human need, that's a problem. If it means we're not helping our recovery, that's a problem. If it means people don't have a job, that's a problem. So, I think it's right to say let's bridge to a new administration, a better administration in terms of their support for cities, support for New York City and see if we can get the support we need so we can keep people whole. That's what we're trying to do right now.

Louis: There's a specific category of New Yorkers, small business owners. They're in an especially difficult position as we wait for whatever is going to come out of Washington. Does the City have any way of helping them, whether it's mortgage relief or other forms of assistance to help bridge them into the spring?

Mayor: It's individual, Errol, in the sense of our Small Business Services Department will help any business with a tailor-made plan, basically, depending on what their situation is and what we have available. And anyone can reach – any small business can call 3-1-1, and reach Small Business Services. Look, some businesses if they get a loan, that will tide them over. Now that we know there's a vaccine coming, now that we know we have a new president who will do a stimulus, a loan might do it for some businesses. We do have access to different loan possibilities. We've got legal help we can provide, if it's a lease problem or some other legal problem. We can make sure that fines are not applied wherever that's appropriate. There's definitely things we can do, and a lot of businesses have been helped. We do not have the widespread resources we'd love to have to just give them a check. I mean, if I had the money, I would just directly support our small businesses. We don't have that, but we are – you know, we're doing the Open Storefronts to help retail stores do outdoor sales, obviously Open Restaurants and now will be permanent outdoor dining. We've tried to help in a variety of ways, but the only way we're going to get a check in people's hands is with a federal stimulus.

Louis: Is there any thought being given to the kind of soft loan in the form of deferring the quarterly tax payments? That was something that was done last year –

Mayor: Well, we've – I think it's a better way to say that with some cases of hardship, we've tried to address taxes individually, but we've got to be very, very careful because the revenue right now that is keeping these services going depends on everyone paying their taxes. And this is really tough – I mean, it gets to be circular at a certain point. You want to give everyone a break but the less and less revenue we bring in, the less we're going to be able to provide services

that people need. You know, we're making sure no New Yorker goes hungry, which is a really solemn promise that every New Yorker who needs food can get it for free. We're making sure that, you know, people are supported with all the health care they need, all the PPE. You know, it all costs money. So, we have to be really careful that we don't make a promise that we're going to protect people and take care of them and then not have the resources to do it.

Louis: Right, okay. In our last minute the Transportation Commissioner, Polly Trottenberg, is leaving. She's going to be working with the transition team in Washington, which might be good for New York. What would you say was her biggest achievement and what do you still want to accomplish in the time you have left in that department?

Mayor: She's done an amazing job and I'm thrilled she'll be working with the transition. It is very good for New York. Unquestionably to me, it's Vision Zero. She was one of the great architects of Vision Zero. This has such a profound reality, the lives we have saved, and it's just begun. And remember, Errol, back in 2014, how many people thought it would never get off the ground, you know, car owners would rebel, politicians would rebel. We said, this is going to work, and it did. And Polly really deserves a tremendous amount of credit. So, that model, I hope she gets to play an important role nationally because the Vision Zero model really should go national. But in terms of – we got more to do on Vision Zero, we got more to do on busways, which have been a great success, Select Bus Service. You know, I want to see less reliance on cars, more and more mass transit. The future of New York City is not the automobile. Sorry, Robert Moses, that's the past. You know, the future of New York City is mass transit, and we're trying to create more and better versions of mass transit – ferries, Select Bus Service, busways, you name it. That's our future.

Louis: Okay. We're going to leave it there for now. We'll wish you a Happy Thanksgiving. If I don't see you out there, we'll talk again next week.

Mayor: Happy Thanksgiving to you and your family, and all your viewers, Errol. Take care.

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