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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 everyone, and we begin as usual on Fridays with our weekly Ask the Mayor segment with Mayor Bill de Blasio. I'll ask him some questions, and you'll ask him some questions. Our lines are open at 2-1-2-4-3-3-WNYC, 2-1-2-4-3-3-9-6-9-2 from all five boroughs. Or tweet a question using the hashtag #askthemayor. Good morning Mr. Mayor, welcome back to WNYC.

Unknown: Brian, we're still waiting on the Mayor just give us a minute.

Lehrer: Okay. Mr. Mayor has a reputation for being late. But I have to say, in all the weeks that we've done the Ask the Mayor segment over the last few years, he has never been late to our dance. So, if he's running a little bit late this morning, at least we can say in our case it's an exception. Let's see. So who do we have on the phone here? How's it looking? I guess we have an aide to the Mayor and let's see. Alright, well maybe we could stockpile some questions. Should we do that? Let's do that. Sebastian in Brooklyn, you're on WNYC. Hi Sebastian.

Question: Hi Brian, thanks for taking my call.

Lehrer: Do you want to be the guest? We could just do Ask Sebastian for the next half hour.

Question: Yeah, let me see if I can keep up with you. You know, I think everybody knows the state of the MTA at the moment and there's a lot of talk about raising money by charging people to drive into Manhattan, but what hasn't been talked about is the [inaudible] New York [inaudible] December talking about the amount of waste at the MTA and their capital projects, talking about the fact that when we build here in New York we spend six times as much as projects in Paris and London and other [inaudible]

Lehrer: Right.

Question: [inaudible] talking about, you know [inaudible]

Lehrer: And you know what, you're line is breaking up so I'm going to go. Also we now have the Mayor on the line, and guess what, your question is going to become my first question to him and I'm going to pass it right along. Hi Mr. Mayor, welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Thank you Brian.

Lehrer: So Sebastian in Brooklyn there was just asking about the New York Times article a few weeks ago about all the waste at the MTA. So when there's all this disagreement between you and the Governor over who should pay how much to fund the MTA, what about the waste that shows, for example, that we use more construction workers for each mile of rail than the similar – than the equivalent system in Paris was what the caller was just citing. And he wants you to be a real hawk on MTA spending and look at those union issues and everything else even as we talk about the State's fair share.

Mayor: I think Sebastian is making a very important point. And here we have a real apples to apples comparison, cities like Paris and London. Very old cities, older than ours, lot of logistical and infrastructure challenges, unionized cities, you know, so very similar in many ways. And we have to learn from their example and we have to learn from what went wrong in our case, obviously look how long it took to move the Second Avenue subway, that's just the first phase of it. So, yes, we have to do something very differently.

My argument here is this is a time of real examination of where we have to go with the future of the MTA. That's a good thing. It's a time where responsibility is being assigned really for the first time in decades because the way things have evolved over the decades, the power over the MTA did end up being of the hands of the State. And now that there's a keen sense of who is responsible and there's a very keen sense that we need a long-term investment plan, I think some real change can happen.

We – you know at the recent MTA meeting my appointees voted against a plan that we thought focused spending in the wrong places, on very valuable things but not as valuable as getting the trains to run on time and dealing with the basic infrastructure of the MTA. I think we need now to say okay, let's reset. We need long-term funding. I think the millionaire's tax is the best idea, and that comes along with the fair fare idea, half price MetroCards for low-income New Yorkers. Other folks are talking about congestion pricing and other options. Whatever idea or combination of ideas prevail in this legislative session in Albany we must have long-term funding. Then we've got to work on getting the priorities of the MTA right. Then we've got to work on getting the efficiency levels of the MTA to be greatly improved. And look, if the year 2018 is the year when the MTA is finally reformed and these issues – you know the question is called once and for all, we'll look back and think it was a very good year. But all of us have to be committed to getting that done.

Lehrer: And since you released the preliminary budget yesterday for the next fiscal year, I'll follow up on that by asking you, I see that its – that there is not – sorry doesn't include anything additional for the MTA. The State is asking for \$400 million next fiscal year, additionally, from the City. That's not a negotiation that's ongoing?

Mayor: I've been very clear about the fact that the way to resolve this is to first on the immediate issues that have to be addressed in the MTA, the MTA does have substantial resources. They should apply them the right way. Not to extraneous matters, but to the core problems related to the signals, the electronics, the things that really determine whether trains run on time and run smoothly. Obviously I've made the point that the State siphoned off \$456 million from the MTA over the last few years. This is the perfect time to put that money back in the MTA budget. That resolves all the short-term issues.

The long-term comes down to a true revenue plan for the MTA that will be sustainable. I think the millionaire's tax is the best way to go, but whatever – again whatever item or combination of items make up a revenue package, by the end of June when the legislature leaves Albany we must have long-term funding for the MTA. From my point of view, that is something that has to be resolved at the State level. We at the City level are responsible for everything else going on in the city when you think about it: police, fire, sanitation, schools, everything you can think of. We have to protect those services and we have to protect our long-term fiscal health which is threatened by both Albany and Washington.

So that's how I divide it. We'll certainly have real negotiations with the State as we go forward, but it makes sense to me that we focus on the things that we're obligated to do, the State focuses on figuring out a long-term revenue plan for the MTA.

Lehrer: Let me take a step back on the budget proposal that you released yesterday for the next fiscal year which begins in July. \$88.7 billion and I see one highlight is your warning of risks from both Albany and Washington. Can you draw the connection between Donald Trump politics and this number, I think its \$700 million or so that you're saying the City might lose.

Mayor: Yes, but I want to say the situations in Washington and Albany are very, very different. Whatever disagreements I have with the State government, the State government is still functioning in a relatively normal fashion. I mean there's a couple things that have gone on in Albany I think break the norm and should be really looked at more carefully. But in general, the State government is working in a broadly consistent fashion with the past.

The federal government is anything but. You know the federal government cannot put together a budget, everything is continuing resolutions. The tax bill is going to have a hugely negative impact on the ability of the federal government to do anything going forward. They just added \$1.5 trillion to the deficit so say goodbye to a real infrastructure plan. And unfortunately say hello to potential cuts to Medicaid and social security. So, the situation in Washington is truly aberrant.

When you combine the immediate cuts on the table from both Washington and Albany, the immediate ones, the ones that are right now expected it is \$1.5 billion. Just for the next fiscal year. And there's a lot more potentially behind that. So that's a part of why we were very cautious in putting together the City budget. We kept reserves very high. There are very few new discretionary spending items. They are very modest. We think they're helpful like a small expansion of 3-K, which I'm excited about, and a couple of other important initiatives. Obviously some new spending for NYCHA which is crucial. But modest in the scheme of the

overall budget because we are prepared for really dangerous possibilities coming out of Washington and Albany.

That good news in Albany is we have a chance to fight back. I think there's a real chance to go and stop some of those cuts. Right now, again, the Albany figure over three quarters of a billion in cuts just in the State budget proposal. But we have a chance to fight some of those back. The federal situation is so aberrant we don't know where it's going and we don't yet know what the impact will be on New York City.

Lehrer: One federal budget thing is that Trump has at least stalled or maybe cancelled, we don't know yet, the promised federal funding under Obama for the Gateway Tunnel project between New York and New Jersey which many people call our area's number one infrastructure priority. Well there's an article in Crain's that says one of the city's top real estate moguls, Steven Roth of Vornado who is a personal friend of Trump, encouraged the President to undermine the Gateway project. Do you know Steve Roth or know this to be true?

Mayor: I know him but I don't know anything about that charge. I think the Gateway project is absolutely crucial. I mean this is the kind of thing – I always like to put in the perspective of other countries. This is the kind of thing that the Chinese government or the Indian government or the German government would have made a national priority. Here's the single most populous area in the country and that connection between New York and New Jersey is crucial to the future of our economy, which means it's crucial to the future of the American economy. And the national government would say we've got to keep building and growing, we've got to protect our long-term interests, of course we're going to do Gateway.

Chris Christie really gets some original sin credit here for having backed away on the state level when he came into office and that really hurt the momentum because we would have had, I think, much more progress under President Obama if Christ Christie had not interfered. But now, we got to hold Trump accountable. If he says he believes in infrastructure then of course there has to be a federal commitment to Gateway and many projects like it around the country.

And I actually think this becomes a huge political issue in 2018 because I think the voters around the country, some of whom voted for Trump believing he would have an impact on their lives, if they see him backslide on his commitment to infrastructure and really only put forward a privatization plan, which is essentially what he's doing, I think there will be a tremendous sense among people that they've been cheated. And you know this is one of the most obvious examples. If all he is doing is try to punish New York and New Jersey politically and/or back away from public investment in infrastructure, I believe not only is it morally wrong I believe it will backfire on him politically.

Lehrer: We know from the article that Trump has reportedly said that 'oh, why should I give money for this particular infrastructure project, it just helps two wealthy states' meaning New York and New Jersey. But can you do any political analysis here of Steve Roth? If the report is accurate, what would a major city landlord have to gain from hobbling his own city's mass transit infrastructure?

Mayor: Yes, Brian I have no idea what that is specifically referring to so I can't comment on it. I'm just going to – I'm going to the big picture here which is what matters. I don't care who is counseling who, we have to fight it. Not just here in New York but we have to fight around the country for a real infrastructure plan.

By the way, in 2015 a number of us, Democrats and Republicans alike, mayors from around the country, business leaders, agricultural leaders, all sorts of folks got together in Washington to fight for a bigger transportation bill – highway bill. And actually achieved real progress. That was before Trump threw off the American political discourse.

I actually think what's going to happen, ultimately, is the people of this country are going to demand real infrastructure spending. The heyday of infrastructure spending in this country was under Dwight Eisenhower and that was when we had a Republican president who believed in infrastructure spending and we had a very high tax rate for the wealthy, and this country's economy was working and much more inclusive of people at all income levels. That is the shape of things to come. People will demand it in this country.

But Gateway, to me, I mean if you say wealthy or unwealthy part of the country, the bigger question is the country. The bigger question is protecting the larger national economy and when New York and the New York metropolitan area are doing well, that is good for the entire American economy. We're the biggest single center in America. We should be doing well for everyone's benefit. And the Gateway Tunnel is necessary to keep that going.

Lehrer: Back to our callers. Jessica in Brooklyn, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi Jessica.

Question: Hi, good morning. Thank you so much for taking my call. Mayor de Blasio at one of your last town hall meetings I asked you about looking into removing the requirement for citizenship in order to be hired by the NYPD and the FDNY, as well as corrections. And you responded with – that you would do research and in hopes of getting – of removing that requirement and allowing legal residents who are – who are able to work here to join the police department and the FDNY and then it would be truly be a fully diverse and integrated agency.

Lehrer: So is that a thing? Mr. Mayor this might be the first time that listeners are hearing it, it's the first time, frankly, that I'm hearing it. A citizen who is an immigrant, a naturalized citizen, can join the FDNY or the NYPD but if you're a Green Card holder, a legal permanent resident, you can't join those uniformed forces? Is that the case?

Mayor: Yes, and Brian, like I always have told you over the last couple of years, when I'm not sure of the specifics of a policy, I don't want to conjecture. I remember Jessica raising it and I did ask people to research it. I got to find out what the state of play is on that.

The only thing I disagree with Jessica on immediately – again, I want to research, I want to come back with a coherent answer. Whatever that answer is, I want to be able to explain it to people but where I disagree on Jessica's framing is the diversification that has gone on in the NYPD and FDNY is very striking.

We got some more work to do in the FDNY to make sure it truly looks like New York City but in the NYPD – and I've been to a number of recent graduations. You know we've had graduation after graduation where the majority of the new officers are New York City residents, we're we've had a majority of people of color, we've had consistently 20 percent women or more.

So, I would separate those two questions. I think we're doing a really good job at both getting great new officers and reflecting the diversity of the city with our current structure but I appreciate Jessica's question. Let me come back for the next show with a coherent answer.

Lehrer: Cherise in Manhattan, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Cherise.

Question: Good morning.

Mayor: Hello, Cherise.

Question: Can you hear me? Yes?

Lehrer: Can hear you just fine. Hi.

Question: Thank you. Sometime ago I got [inaudible] Mr. Mayor, I spoke to you some time ago regarding my condition and my [inaudible] with my kid. So, I got to the [inaudible] signing of the lease and collect the key from the landlord. They said my part was zero and after a couple of months, the landlord informed me that the checks they were \$100 short each month. I went to [inaudible]. They said it's not them. I went to P-A, they sent me back –

Mayor: Okay, Cherise. Cherise, let me break in. We need to follow up on your case specifically because I'm sure there's details we have to understand so we can fix it. Please give your information to the folks at WNYC so we can go and find a way to get this fixed.

Lehrer: Cherise, we're going to take your information right now and make sure you get connected with the Mayor's Office. Does it ring a bell on any kind of a pattern? I'm not sure I heard enough to know but –

Mayor: Yeah, it does. Not the specific disagreement over what the dollar gap might be but the bigger point that we are trying to make sure as many people as possible can stay in their apartments or God forbid they ever are homeless that we can get them back to permanent housing and keep them there.

One of the ways we do that is with housing vouchers, the federal kind and the kind that we have created. There's often a challenge finding enough landlords who will take them and making sure that things smoothly with the landlords. We're trying to improve that. We're trying to make it a more appealing and consistent equation for landlords. A lot of them are smaller landlords and I think have been really good partners.

But you know, we've got some work to do on it. I think some of it is also, it's just naturally something that every case is different and sometimes there are misunderstandings and we've got

to make sure there's an easy [inaudible] to turn to get those things resolved. So, I have found in general, Brian – and this is something we've done a lot in this administration – having more human beings who are facilitators, problem solvers, like help desks. We've been doing a lot more of that. It's actually been helping a lot for example. We've started this really with the pre-K and 3-K applications. Having – when you're trying to apply, if you have any problems, it's easy to get to a human being who can then work with you to specifically find the program that helps you.

That's been a fantastically successful. We want to do a lot more of that. So, I think that will help in Cherise's case and beyond.

And since I have mentioned this I do want to point out, today I'll be talking about the fact that applications are opening for 3-K on Monday and anyone who wants to apply, it's in certain districts. Eventually it would be fully universal. But you can call 3-1-1 or you can go on the City website. Parents who have three-year-olds going into September should be looking in the districts that we have 3-K for that opportunity for free early childhood education for your children.

And Brian I just want to let you know one more thing on this that we have added additional districts that will have universal 3-K on the way to fully universal in 2021. So, what we have right now – in the South Bronx District 7, in Brownsville District 23 are already up and running. Starting in the next school year, starting in September – East Harlem District 4, Harlem District 5, Southeast Queens District 27, and Bed-Stuy District 16 will begin universal 3-K.

In September of 2019 – Washington Heights and Inwood District 6, Grand Concourse area of the Bronx District 9, Staten Island District 31, and East New York's District 19 will be up and running.

And then in September of '20 – Central Bronx District 12 and Northeast Queens District 29. That's September of '20. By September of '21 – everyone.

For parents in these areas you can start planning on free early childhood education for your three-year-olds universally.

Lehrer: That's a good public service to put out there, the specific district. And that's one of the things in your preliminary budget that you unveiled yesterday that goes up next year because you're expanding the universal pre-K program to more three-year-olds.

Budget watchdogs say maybe the most irresponsible or risky thing you've done budget-wise as Mayor is add so many City workers compared to past mayors, and another 4,000 in this new budget proposal despite the other Washington and Albany pressures you were talking about before. Why does that make sense? Where's that need?

Mayor: Okay, I would bring this back first of all to the philosophical matter. You either believe in public employment or you don't. I am – you know, I've said to you before and many other people – I am inspired by what I think was some of the most extraordinary times in American

history in terms of government doing good for people when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was president and Fiorello LaGuardia was mayor of this city.

I believe in a Keynesian view economically that a certain amount of public activity is not only productive unto itself in terms of the services it provides but it's good for the economy, good for the strategic future of this city. So when we invest in more pre-K teachers and 3-K teachers, when we invest in more building inspectors to keep people safe and to make sure that buildings are built properly, when we invest in more traffic enforcement agents to reduce congestion – I go down a list – obviously 2,000 more officers on patrol at the NYPD which has achieved the lowest crime we've had since the 1950s and a much better relationship between police and community.

These were investments worth making, and yeah, they increased – they involve increased headcount, that's true and why don't we look at it for what we've gotten for that investment. I think they're sound investments. They build the strength of the city. They build the city's economy. Everything that comes out of that makes this a stronger city and a place that people want to invest in. If it's safer, if it has better schools that's where businesses invest.

So, I'm not just scared of adding to headcount. We at the same time are very aggressively finding new savings. Since the November budget modification we found \$900 million additional savings. We're going to keep adding savings. I have pledged another \$500 million, half-a-billion in savings by the time we do the executive budget in the spring.

But I really believe that, that increased headcount is paying off for this city in many very positive ways and I wish the watchdogs who I respect, I wish they would address that point. Is it strategically moving us forward as a city? I'd say yes.

Lehrer: You also have a new round of negotiations beginning as the City employee contracts will expire soon. With the new uncertainties for the budget that you've been looking at, are you forecasting a tougher negotiation cycle ahead than the last one?

Mayor: I'm not going to get into the nuances. I would say obviously we had a great example in 2014 after years and years where our City employees were not under contract – and this something I really think the previous administration did wrong having the entire workforce not under contract, had people waiting years and years for a contract.

We finally got everyone, essentially under contract, with a labor negotiation that led to a very fair outcome for working people but also was fiscally responsible. That's what we're looking for again, that kind of outcome. I obviously agree that – to your point – that the federal picture is so murky and there's so many dangers and that State picture is not so great either, that our colleagues in labor need to be aware of just how tough the circumstance is and how bad it could get.

Remember this is just the first year we've had of the Trump administration. We've got three more to go and we know a lot of what they do will hurt cities like New York.

So I think that is a sobering point but I'm also confident after the last negotiations that we can end up with a very fair outcome.

Lehrer: Matt in the Financial District, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Matt.

Question: Hi, Brian. Hi. Mr. Mayor. Thank you for taking my call. I feel a bit sheepish asking about New York Times transit story but I was just wondering Mr. Mayor if you saw the piece yesterday on the report from the Center for American Future about the half-million health care workers, how most of them live in the outer boroughs and the commute in the outer boroughs and that the transit gaps out there and the poor service are really falling hardest on them. I'm just curious, seeing stories like that, I know there's been a lot of talk every Friday about congestion pricing hurts. It seems like it could benefit millions of New Yorkers. So I'm just wondering if stories like this change your attitude.

Lehrer: Let me just jump in with a clarification because I didn't see this Times article, Matt. Did they suggest that a lot of those low-income health care workers are driving into Manhattan to work?

Question: No, no, the contrary. I think about two-thirds of the health care facilities are outside Manhattan. It's one of the few industries where that seems to be the case and they're especially dependent on buses even and not even the subway because there's not subway routes in places like Canarsie has one stop. It doesn't go where people need to go. There's not service in Flatlands. There's not service to –

Lehrer: Right but you related it to congestion pricing, didn't you?

Question: Yeah, just that really we need to fund more than just the subways and so, I guess the question with all the talk about congestion pricing being bad for low-income New Yorkers, does seeing the health care workers who could benefit from an infusion of funds you know who –

Mayor: I got it. I got it.

Lehrer: Does it convince him toward that position? Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Guys, let me try again because I've been speaking on this issue for months and I appreciate the good faith question but I would also like folks to key in on the logic pattern I'm putting forward here. First of all, we need long term substantial new funding for the future of the MTA, like really substantial new funding that had to be sustainable. I believe a millionaire's tax is the best way to do it.

When people then go to the immediate, oh, it's not politically viable. You know I don't know if congestion pricing is politically viable. I think we should put aside that question and focus on what's the best plan. I think the millionaire's tax is the most sustainable, the most fair, it would include the Fair Fares for the half-priced MetroCards for low-income New Yorkers which certainly would be very helpful to a lot of those health care workers who work at very low wages especially the home care workers.

So I still think we should work towards that. I think we should work toward that right now in this legislative session. I also think in November, the State Senate is going to change hands and become a Democrat majority State Senate and there will be an openness even more so to progressive taxation.

So, that's what I feel. Now, I've said that the more recent congestion pricing proposal that came out of the Governor's commission was certainly better than previously proposals, still a lot of unanswered questions. And this gets to the core of Matt's point. Any proposal should be based on the notion of a lock box in which the money will only be spent in the five boroughs on subways and buses. Obviously that's what my millionaire's tax proposal calls for. The money would only be raised from millionaires and billionaires in New York City and would only be spent in New York City.

On the congestion pricing proposal, we don't know that yet. There's a whole lot that needs to be debated in Albany but I want to see every dime stay in the city. And I agree that one of the focuses needs to be putting that money in the parts of the outer boroughs that are underserved.

Meanwhile, we're doing that already. We're saying with 21 new Select Bus Service lines that have been a huge success – and we're going to take them to all sorts of area in the outer boroughs that are underserved, speeding up service. The NYC Ferry has been fantastic for some underserved areas like the Rockaways, Red Hook, soon-to-be Soundview in the Bronx. We know that the light rail system, BQX, is going to reach some underserved areas including a lot of folks in public housing.

We're continuing to build up our mass transit system while Albany is trying to figure out its vision and while the MTA is essentially dealing with its own existing system, the City of New York is aggressively building out the mass transit system in the outer boroughs.

And to be fair we are working very productively with the MTA on Select Bus Service and that's been one of the good news stories. But my argument is let's get that big long term funding source – millionaire's tax, whatever combination of items prevails. Let's get that long term funding source and then let's make sure that money stays in the City and a lot of it is focused on the outer borough areas that lack mass transit.

Lehrer: We're almost out of time. Two things real quick. One – did you see the CUNY Journalism student's report that's gotten picked up by the major media that nearly half the school cafeterias in the city last year were hit with at least Health code violation and that the standards for passing an inspection are lower than they are for restaurants?

Mayor: I have not seen the report so I can't comment on the specifics and I want to confirm to you whether we agree with all those specifics. But the big picture point, and I say this as a public school parent. Until just a few years ago, my kids went every single year of their education within our public schools. I care a lot about what happens in our cafeterias. I care obviously about the health of our kids. Does not make me happy if our cafeterias are not being kept to a high standard.

What I do understand is that when those problems have come up, they tend to be fixed immediately because a lot of those violations, thankfully, are small and single instances that can be addressed quickly. But we're going to hold the cafeterias to a very high standard and I will certainly look into what's brought up in that report and make sure we're doing something bigger to address it.

Lehrer: And finally Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow today, I understand. And I think that means six more weeks of global warming deniers saying, see it's still cold in the winter.

[Laughter]

Mayor: That does not prove their point and I would say to all the global warming deniers, get over it because we have to change the way we're living and that's why New York City is divesting in companies with fossil fuel reserves, taking \$5 billion out of the fossil fuel companies and suing five of the very biggest fossil fuel companies for damages because of what they've done to the city with the expansion of global warming. And it's time that they paid back here and many other places for what they've done to us.

Lehrer: But I guess after you and Michael Bloomberg both had unfortunate incidents with groundhogs, this is not a Mayor, Staten Island thing anymore, right,

Mayor: You know what, there are fine elected officials who are much more adept at handling groundhogs than me. So they will get the assignment going forward. I think I've done my time –

[Laughter]

Lehrer: And you've done your time here for today. Thank you for serving it. You're now free on parole for the next week. Talk to you next Friday.

Mayor: Thank you, Brian. Take care.

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