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

Brian Lehrer: But we begin today as usual on Fridays with Mayor Bill de Blasio and our Friday Ask the Mayor segment. Morning, Mr. Mayor. Welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, Brian.

Lehrer: And listeners our phones are open for your questions for the Mayor at 2-1-2-4-3-3-WNYC. 4-3-3-9-6-9-2 or tweet a question with the hashtag #AsktheMayor.

Let me begin with you cancelling a meeting you were supposed to have with the President. What happened there?

Mayor: Well, I came in good faith to Washington. It's the U.S. Conference of Mayors annual meeting here. Mayors around the country came here and we had gotten an invitation from the White House to come and talk about infrastructure, Democrats and Republicans both. We were willing to go on the basis of having a serious conversation about an issue that affects every one of our cities.

And the very same morning, the Department of Justice, in a very showy manner, threatened once again funding to New York City and 22 other cities because they want us to question immigrants. When our police engage immigrants they want us to ask people's documentation status. They want to disrupt the progress that we've made in building a positive relationship between our police and our immigrant communities.

And we said a year ago when the President issued his executive order on immigration, we said we're not going to change our policies and we believe it's unconstitutional for the federal government to try and compel New York City to change its local policies in policing. They threatened to take away federal money that we use to fight terrorism and crime. And we said we will not budge in the face of this threat.

So, in light of this threat being reiterated the very same morning that the White House claimed to want to have an honest bipartisan dialogue, a number of mayors, Democrats and Republicans

both, decided that it was not appropriate to go through with the meeting. And to make matters worse, Brian, when the meeting finally did occur with some other mayors who stayed and went to it, it turned out to be very sadly nothing more than a photo-op where the President did not engage the mayors in conversation.

All of his recent predecessors, Obama, Bush, and Clinton, would have the mayors of the country over once a year to have an actual dialogue on issues. Trump didn't ever intend to, it's now clear, but most importantly for him to threaten funding that we use to fight crime and terrorism because of his obsession with attacking immigrants, that was something obviously I could not stand for.

Lehrer: I read some pushback today that suggests you might have taken a principle stand as you just described it but you could have taken that stand in other ways, hold firm with City policy as you are but put off your meeting with the President or turned it down at the expense of ways the President can really hurt the people of the city in terms of federal funding if he wants to spite you for the public snub which would actually be his style. Was it worth that risk?

Mayor: No, I don't believe that and I've said that really literally from the time he was inaugurated. I think it's a misunderstanding of Donald Trump to think that you should be fearful of slighting him and his variable personality and his wild flings of emotions and views. I think that's a misread.

I think the only thing he understands is force and resoluteness. I think it's very important to stand up to him. It's one of the only ways to ensure that what he's trying to do doesn't happen. And in this instance it's really clear this action that the administration took that same morning as what was supposed to be, again, a bipartisan open meeting – it was a slap in the face to all of those cities and to our people. And we have to show him we'll stand up.

So, no, I don't think it's right to ever [inaudible] or cower in the face of the kind of affronts we see from this administration. And I also think on the issue of infrastructure, we see again the Trump administration all over the map. We think that the actual decision making is going to happen in the Congress which seems to be the paradigm more and more and we're going to engage productively with you know Democratic and Republican members of the Congress to try and get something good done on infrastructure but we're not going to waste time if the White House is only going to play these kind of games.

Lehrer: Any reaction to the President's latest stated bargaining position on immigration? It's a path to citizenship for DREAMers in general not just current DACA recipients in exchange for full funding for the border wall – that's like \$25 billion not just the \$1.6 billion for this first year – and new limits on the diversity visas and bringing in brothers and sisters as legal new immigrants. Is it at least the basis for negotiation in your opinion?

Mayor: Given that the Trump administration changes their mind constantly, I don't want to overstate that notion. Look, it's at least positive to see them acknowledging a pathway to keeping the DREAMers here where they belong. But I'll tell you something, the notion of ending family reunification – and I say this with real personal passion. My grandparents Giovanni and Anna came here from Southern Italy, a very economically backward place at the time 100 years ago.

They came here, not speaking English, not having advanced degrees. They came here because other family members had come ahead of them.

Under Donald Trump's policies he's proposing now, my own grandparents would not have been allowed into this country, countless other grandparents of New Yorkers listening right now, their grandparents would not have been allowed in the country. We all wouldn't be here. And it's really an affront to the history of our city and our country [inaudible] notion that we're not going to allow families to come together. People are already here contributing, helping us to become a stronger city and a stronger country. That we're not going to allow their family members to come, it's an affront to everything we've ever known as a country. We should not ever accept that.

And obviously in his case, it's underlined by some mythology that Trump loves to promote, you know, that in the good old days only white people were let in and that people of color don't contribute when in fact people of color largely are the people who built this country.

So, it's just – it cannot be accepted on its face. It has – can't even see it as a bargaining position because I'm so affronted by it.

Lehrer: It's our Friday Ask the Mayor here on WNYC. 2-1-2-4-3-3-WNYC or tweet a question with the hashtag #AsktheMayor. Naheema in Manhattan, you're on WNYC. Good morning.

Question: Good morning. Thank you so much, Brian. Thank you, Mr. Mayor. I am in total desperate need of your help Mr. Mayor. The landlord is trying to remove me. I win my case in housing court not once but several times. Now, he use all kinds of tactics to remove me and I really need your help because they – totally, I'm confused what they're trying to do to me. And I've been living in the same apartment for 36 years. They took [inaudible] within one blocks, two blocks from each other, converted to illegal hotels and evicted most of the rent-stabilized tenants, and I'm by the grace of God standing because always fighting because I have nowhere to go. I'm a poor person.

And now he use all kind of tactics on the book trying to get me out and I really need somebody from your office to look into this matter. And I've been [inaudible] in the afternoon. I really, really need your help, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Naheema, thank you so much for telling everyone your story because this is something that so many New Yorkers face. And so, first, I need you to make sure you give your information to WNYC. We will follow up with you immediately to get you the legal help you need to protect you against eviction. We want to make sure you're not evicted and that you're protected.

So, leave your information right away. I want to take this moment to say today we're actually making an announcement directly related to this which is our anti-eviction efforts where we provide free lawyers to folks who are facing illegal eviction like Naheema, these efforts with great help from the City Council are showing more and more impact.

We just had a report out now that evictions went down another five percent last year. That means in the last four years, evictions are down 27 percent in New York City. That translates in very human terms to over 70,000 people in our city who have been able to stay in their affordable apartment because they got legal help and they were protected. And this is something that we're applying more and more all around the city.

We've found it to be a very tool for change because for years and years the unscrupulous of members of the landlord group – not every landlord is unscrupulous but some are – the unscrupulous ones went into court and got people evicted and those tenants didn't even have a lawyer to defend them. Now the City is providing that for free and anyone like Naheema faced with illegal eviction should call 3-1-1 and we will get you legal help to protect you.

Lehrer: Alright, Naheema, we're going to take your information off the phone and connect you with the Mayor's Office.

Ken on Staten Island, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello Ken.

Question: Good morning. Thank you, Brian. Hello Mr. Mayor and Brian.

I have a suggestion to propose to the Mayor. I know you're always talking about creating good jobs in this city and I have a suggestion with your summer youth employment program. I think this could be improved upon by matching up appropriate students with an interest to come and work for small internet startups in the city and even extend it to be all year round. I know I could use the help.

Mayor: Okay, well Ken, I appreciate that idea a lot. We want summer youth jobs to be in the areas where our economy is growing. [Inaudible] I think the summer youth employment program is a great concept and the City Council, again, has been very, very focused, we've been building it up. But the thing I want to work on is making sure that the young people get experiences that will actually help them in their employment future. And getting involved in the technology sector, for example, would be extraordinarily positive. We want – we want to make sure that more and more of those experiences are actually pertinent to the kind of jobs that will exist in the future for these young people.

So, yes, that's the kind of thing we want to do. I'm not sure we can do a lot of year-round yet, just because of the cost, because obviously the public sector contributes a lot of it. But we certainly want to do the summer, and if you'd leave your information as well, we'd love to see if we can connect you with one or more of the young people in the program to see if they could have a good summer experience with you.

Lehrer: In case Ken has inspired other employers in tech start-ups, and I hope he has, to get interested in summer youth employment job program kids, how can they register in general? How can they make that availability known? Do you know?

Mayor: Well I would say on the jump, we have a very energetic effort through the Mayor's Fund to build up these summer opportunities and internships and mentorships. Folks can call 3-

1-1 and get connected to the Mayor's Fund and the work we're doing there on the behalf of young people. That would be the easiest.

So we definitely want employers to come forward. A lot have by the way, I want to be really clear, in the last four years we put the call out to employers to be involved in either summer youth employment or mentorships or internships for young people. There's been a really enthusiastic response and what we hear from a lot of employers is they get a lot of information – important information, insight from the young people being there in their offices and giving them sort of a current perspective on new audiences, new markets, new ideas. So, yes, through 3-1-1, get connected to the Mayor's Fund, and we would love to have more companies get involved.

Lehrer: Ken, thank you. Roxanne in the Bronx, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi Roxanne.

Question: Hi Brian, you're my favorite.

Lehrer: Thank you.

Question: First thank you Mr. Mayor for the expected animal shelter in the Bronx in 2026. Is it possible to have it sooner than 2026? [Inaudible] City's lease of facility to help the TNR Bronx community in the meanwhile. TNR increases –

Mayor: I couldn't hear that first part. You said –

Question: – cat population [inaudible] natural deterrent for rats.

Mayor: I missed the beginning of that. You mentioned what is already planned.

Lehrer: Yes, she – yes which is a Bronx animal shelter by 2026 and she's asking if it can be earlier.

Mayor: Well we're going to work to – we want it as fast as we can get it because we put the money in the budget because we know there are so many animals that we need to protect and we know so many people in the city care deeply, rightfully, about the issue. So, I definitely would love to see it go faster. I got to find out what it will take to do that. But, if the question is, is that our aspiration, the answer is yes.

Lehrer: Joe in Queens, you're in WNYC with the mayor. Hi Joe.

Question: Hi. Mr. Mayor I welcome your efforts to strengthen the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, going to Iowa and the symbolism of Bernie Sanders, and your fossil fuel divestment plan, and everything you've been doing. My question is, is it now time to act on the resolution that the US Conference of Mayors passed last summer and take on the awful Trump federal budget that's coming at us, not just regressive tax policies but also the huge increase in Pentagon spending? It seems to me normal – both of them are going to hurt funding streams for New York City public services and normal budget hearings just won't work. They're about who gets – how big the slice of the pie rather than the shrinking size of the pie itself. Isn't it time to

mobilize? Can't you – can you convince the City Council to hold a special hearing on this – on this topic?

Mayor: Well okay, you put a lot of points together, let me see if I can give you a straightforward answer. I appreciate your point in the beginning, I mean, look, I think this is all caught up with having to change the way the political process works and change the way the debate goes in this country. Right now the discussion that should be in Washington, not just about saving our DREAMers, but also about addressing the opioid crisis, protecting hospitals around the country that are threatened if there isn't a renewal of what's called the DHS payments that keeps so many hospitals going and ailing – enables them to serve a broad population. These big, crucial issues that affect everyday life in communities, we've got to get them front and center in the discussion.

So, I don't think it's so much – I would welcome the City Council's action on it but I think it's bigger in the sense that we've got to change the political dialogue to focus on the core economic issues, the ways we address economic unfairness, and then I think that gets us to this question of domestic spending versus military spending.

That right now for millions and millions of Americans their economic reality is they're stuck, they are not moving forward, they don't see a lot of hope, they don't see a lot of hope for their next generation. This is so much of what played out in the 2016 election. Those folks, their anger, their frustration is real and honest. We should be moving the discussion of the Democratic Party and the whole country to how to provide real economic relief for so many millions – and these are people of all colors, middle-class and working-class people all over the country. That would mean, for example, a real infrastructure bill. The trillion dollar plan that the Senate democrats are supporting, public investment of a trillion dollars to actually do something transcendent in our economy, not the watered down privatization scheme that it appears that President Trump is putting forward.

I think that's the kind of thing that changes the debate and then puts the military spending in perspective. I think most Americans – we of course believe we need a military that can protect us but if they had to make a decision on do we – are we going to fix our roads, our bridges, our subways, our trains, are we going to make sure they're safe, are we make sure there's jobs for people and that people can actually have an economic future, that's where they would want the priority to be in the budget.

Lehrer: I read that some of the pension fund trustees might be a little skeptical about this fossil fuel divestment. Are you running into a speedbump?

Mayor: Not at all. The biggest of the five New York City pension funds is the New York City Employees Retirement System, that fund – the board has already voted in favor divestment now. The next one, the Teachers Board, obviously when we announced our divestment plan for fossil fuel companies, Michael Mulgrew, the head of the teachers union was sitting right there and participating actively. I am confident that the Teachers Retirement Board will vote shortly for divestment. Those two account for I think it's about 60 percent of all of our investments right there. So, we obviously want to move the others but you know, given the momentum that you're

already seeing with the biggest having already made the formal decision to move forward, I feel very good about where we are.

Lehrer: We talked about negotiating with President Trump, you've also got negotiations going on with the Governor over MTA – excuse me – MTA funding. One new controversy, as you know, is he wants to capture a certain kind of New York City property tax to dedicate to the MTA. What's the issue there as you see it?

Mayor: It's unfortunately an example of the State trying to reach into a decision that should only be made in New York City. And by the way, last year there was an effort by the State to get involved in the land use process in not only New York City but in other parts of the metropolitan area and get to make decisions on land that was around MTA facilities in different cities. And you saw a very strong backlash from bigger cities, smaller towns, democratic, republican did not matter. The message was consistent, it's not the place of the State of New York to get involved in our local matters and try and reach into the way we make decisions for ourselves. So this is the same reality.

To take our property taxes which pay for our police, our schools, you know, our parks, our sanitation, to try and take from our property taxes for something the State wants is absolutely unacceptable. And if the Governor or the State want to try and do it in New York City then they should try to do it in Long Island and Westchester and a lot of other places that will not take kindly to it either and they'll see what that backlash looks like.

In the end, the first thing the State should do is return the \$456 million diverted away from the MTA – earmarked funds from revenues that were earmarked specifically for the MTA diverted by the State to other purposes over the last few years, put that money back and then we can discuss how to move forward.

Lehrer: You also criticize the MTA and the Governor I see for more than 30 expensive station renovations rather than repairing signals and tracks and things like that to keep the system running well. But are station improvements really just whistles and bells or is creating user-friendly experiences in our subway stations part of good customer service that makes people want to be here because it feels like a decent quality of life city to be in?

Mayor: Those are important things Brian, they're just not as important as your train actually showing up or your train getting someplace on time or not getting stuck in the middle of a tunnel. I mean, look, I talk to New Yorkers about this all the time. We're New Yorkers, we love to see beautiful, you know shiny things like they have in some other cities but that's not the first imperative, the vast majority of New Yorkers who talk to me about the MTA – it's not about countdown clocks, it's not about wifi, it's about the train getting there in time and having the ability to get to work on time or be able to pick up their kids after school and things that they, you know have no choice, they have to get to, needing to believe they could rely on the MTA again.

And this where I am asking the State to you know, get its priorities straight. That money needs to go to the things that will actually affect the most fundamental experience that straphangers have

that means fix the signals, fix the electronic systems, whatever it will take to make the subways run on time. That's where the money should go. You know a lot of us were frustrated when the MTA was talking about putting up lights on bridges that you know where basically decoration. And that was going to cost hundreds of millions of dollars – why on earth would they be spending money on anything but fixing the subways and getting the trains to run on time. Once that's done, once you know you got every dollar going to that, sure then of course we would like nicer platforms and would like count down clocks and all those other things. But this is just about getting, you know, first thing is first and I have not heard the MTA own up to the fact that until they can make trains run on time, you know everything else is secondary.

Lehrer: Mariah in Bushwick, you're on WNYC with the Mayor, Hi Mariah.

Question: Hello Brian, you're a hero –

Lehrer: Thanks.

Question: Hello, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Hi.

Question: I'm calling about my experience with the Human Resources Administration in the City's in the food stamps office. I'm a full time freelance artist and hard times put me on food stamps for just a month last year but I dealt with the administrative fall out for six months.

I found out the only way to access the [inaudible] is to line up at 7:30 am at one of their offices with a hundred people. This process made it very difficult for me to seek and find work and to interview. The only way to get in touch with your case officers through this process – you're not allowed to call them at any locations. I was sent to three offices and worst of all, without my knowledge I was removed from my New York State health plan and when I asked the Human Resources Administration about it they said that since I told them I had asthma they had removed me from my plan and the City was taking over my health plan.

So after six months of calls all over the board, I was finally to get back off my health plan because I was in the State. So I was calling to see if you can help make this process less grueling for other New Yorkers who have a hard time.

Mayor: Well Mariah, I'm very glad you raised this and it is troubling to hear. First, if there is anything still going on with your situation where you need our help, please give your information WNYC and we are going to follow up with you.

On the bigger picture that you are raising, this troubles me to hear this because I – one, you know, if it is something which health plan you are going be on, you know that should be done with care and consideration for each New Yorker to make sure to understand what's happening, they can get the health care they need. If there is a valid reason that the plan needs to be switched it shouldn't be mysterious.

But on the previous point you made, if people are, you know, waiting in a long line and it's disrupting their ability to seek work and you know, it sounds like we may not be aligned properly for what the mission is. Obviously the mission is to always to help people back on their feet and

to get people to be, you know able to get back to work and to have a better life. So if we are doing something that's inadvertently making that harder we have got to fix that. So I'm going to ask the leadership of the Human Resources Administration to follow up with you as well to hear about your experience and see if there is something there we can fix. I'm sorry that it was such a tough process for you.

Question: Thanks so much, I just want to ask if I, you know, if there's a way that you could make it possible if HRA could consider making it possible to call a case officer? I think that would be a technological leap for a 2018, you know you would be able to email or call your case officer rather than line up at 7:00 am with a hundred people every time you need to deal with your case. You know, I think that would, [inaudible] that. So thank you so much for your [inaudible].

Mayor: No, thank you – just one more point Brian, Mariah, thank you for that. And I think that is a really good point. I mean there are certain things where, you know, when you provide a government benefit, you do need to have, you know, an in person meeting in certain cases. But I think there are a lot other times where it could be done by phone and email. And I agree with you that we should be looking for every opportunity – and I know there have been cases where this was done effectively where people were not required to come back so often or things could be done by phone or email to simplify it. We don't want to tie up peoples' lives if they are trying to look for work and trying to get back on their feet, so this is a really good suggestion. And again, I'll have the leadership from HRA talk to Mariah directly to get this perspective.

Lehrer: I'll throw in a couple of things here too. I know the Food Bank for New York City does a good job of helping people navigate the food stamp system – I think mostly when they are first applying for food stamps. So not to negate all of those things, by any means that Mariah was asking for but that's another avenue for some people is to use the Food Bank.

And she mentioned the health insurance – I believe Mr. Mayor that people have until next Wednesday, January 31st to sign up for an Obamacare policy in New York State. The deadline is already come and gone for this year in New Jersey and Connecticut, but in New York through next Wednesday and then a policy could kick in in March. So I just figured I would throw that in to let people know they still have a few days.

Mayor: Brian that is so important and thank you for raising that. We have a big outreach effort called Get Covered NYC. It is really simple for people to sign up, so you're right people have until Wednesday the 31st. It is a fast process, I want to emphasize this. Anyone who does not have health insurance, first of all, I want to first say as your Mayor and I feel this also as a parent, you know, everyone should have health insurance.

All you have to do is call 3-1-1, we will connect you to an actual human being who can navigate it with you, it does not take a huge amount of documentation to get into this process and sign up for health insurance. And we really found a way to make it much quicker and easier for people to do.

So anyone who does not have health insurance, call 3-1-1 right now and get going on this so we can get you signed up by Wednesday. And it will give you a lot more piece of mind and security in life to have it. And by the way, the Affordable Care Act, Obamacare is alive and well despite

Donald Trump's efforts, it is still functioning and function well. In fact there has been a surge of people signing up all over the country so New Yorkers should follow suit between now and Wednesday.

Lehrer: Let me get your reaction to the revelation that one of your past campaign donors Harendra Singh, pleaded guilty in 2015 to bribing your office to get special treatment for one of his restaurants with a lease on city property and as the Times describes, a federal criminal information in the case, it's clear he got something in return. In fairness to you for context, prosecutors looked at this with respect to you and concluded that you did not commit a crime. But how can someone be guilty of giving you a bribe and you not be guilty of taking it?

Mayor: It's abundantly clear and I will say it for everyone – this man did a lot bad things in a lot of places. I'm someone who never did, never would be involved in such an effort. I was thoroughly looked at and there is a reason there were no charges brought because there was nothing there. This guy to save his own skin struck a plea deal with the federal prosecutors. That's what this, he agreed to certain charges for his own self-preservation. But, I've been 100 percent consistent – what he said happened, did not happen period.

Lehrer: So you're saying something pretty damning about the justice system which would be that –

Mayor: What part of that isn't clear?

Lehrer: Well the implication beyond this case is that people wind up pleading guilty to things they didn't do.

Mayor: You can get experts in the law to speak their situations. What I'm saying, you know, to how plea bargains work and how prosecution works, one thing or another – I'm saying to you it did not happen. If it happened obviously there would have been a result of the investigations that went on. And this is a guy who obviously is a bad human being who did bad things and was caught doing bad things and then when people do that all they try and do is lessen the punishment to save their own skins. But this has been looked at really carefully, nothing that he describes as having happened, happened period.

Lehrer: Is that the same as Trump's defense to some degree in the Russia, investigation? Look, Michael Flynn is a liar – he's an admitted liar so how would you believe anything he says about me?

Mayor: I think they are apples and oranges. There's been a full investigation and Brian I got to say honestly, when there's been a full investigation and we've answered an thousand times, it's time to stop talking about. So I got nothing else to say anything on that.

Lehrer: Last question – from a listener on twitter, does the BQX exist? Is this a real plan, give us a status update.

Mayor: Yes, it's a real plan with tremendous promise because we as a city, we know already. We are growing rapidly. We are going to at be nine million people in the not too distant future. We got a subway system that's already plagued by overcrowding. Our roads, I don't have to tell everyone, they are too congested. We have got to different approaches.

What's working? NYC Ferry has been a great success, huge ridership, much greater than projections. Citi bike has been a huge success, growing all the times. Select bus service, expedited bus routes, which we work on very productively with the MTA, have been huge hits, huge ridership, we are going to keep expanding them, 21 more lines coming.

But we have got to go farther and light rail has been the rage all over the country by the way. You know, cities all over the country who did not have enough mass transit, didn't have subways like us. They are all building extensive light rail systems. We have to look for every opportunity to do that in New York City and here is one of the places in the City along the Brooklyn and Queens waterfront on the East River that is growing so fast, both in terms of jobs and population, it needs more mass transit options. And the BQX is going to be a great alternative for people. So it is moving, it's a lot of work to make it happen logistically, but it is moving forward.

Lehrer: Well, as we run out of time on our Ask the Mayor segment for this week I'm glad to say we were able to get questions in from all six boroughs, Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, Staten Island, the Bronx, and Twitter. So Mr. Mayor thanks as always, I'll talk to you next week.

Mayor: You're very modern Brian, thank you.

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