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RUSH TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO ANNOUNCES MAJOR SECTIONS OF CENTRAL PARK AND PROSPECT PARK WILL BECOME PERMANENTLY CAR-FREE, DEDICATED SOLELY TO RECREATION

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Well, we have an announcement today, and we're very proud to make it, but I first need to talk about the events in Charleston because I think they're rightfully weighing on all of us this morning. This was an absolutely troubling and heart wrenching moment. The fact is that nine innocent lives are lost. Our hearts go out to the people of Charleston. Our hearts go out to the members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. We in this city feel the pain of people anywhere in this country, anywhere in this globe, because we're so connected to each and every part of the country and the world. There are so many people here who hail from South Carolina, and it's a very, very painful moment for all of us. I want everyone to know there's no place in New York City for this kind of hatred, and that we, through the NYPD, have increased our resources directed at protecting African-American churches in this city as a precaution.

The fact is that even though we don't know the whole story here, we have seen time and time again these times of horrific attacks motivated by bias. We've seen so many tragedies in our high schools and college campuses like this – so many related to mental health problems – so many mental health problems that in many cases, were noticed and not acted upon. So there's a lot that we have to unravel here. We can talk about it later on in this gathering, but we've got to take very seriously the fact that many of these tragedies occur and there are warning signs that we can act on if – if we are more aggressive about dealing with the question of mental health, and de-stigmatizing it, and opening up both the discussion and taking the actions we need on mental health in this city and in this country. So, our prayers are with the families of those who are lost. Our prayers are with the members of that church and all of the people of Charleston today.

Let's have a moment of silence for all of the victims.

[Mayor de Blasio observes moment of silence]

Thank you. In the midst of all that it is good to remember some of the good things. And one of the great things about this city is this beautiful park – Prospect Park. And we can say the same –

[Cheer]

There's a fan right there. We can say the same about Central Park for sure. This park means so much to me and my family. And years ago, some of the people, in fact, standing around me helped educate me to the fact that we needed to do better in terms of making our parks places that were safe and available to all. So when I ran for this office, I said my goal is to have parks that are free of regular vehicular traffic. And today, we're taking a big step in that direction.

[Applause]

I haven't given you the details yet, but you can clap.

[Applause]

Today, we're taking a big step to returning our parks to the people, and that's the whole idea to begin with. We're creating safe zones for kids to play in, for bikers, for joggers, for everyone to know that they will be safer and they can enjoy the park in peace. Starting on Monday, July 6th, the West Drive of Prospect Park Drive will be car-free. Now you can clap.

[Applause]

And on Monday, June 29th, the entire loop drive north of 72nd Street in Central Park will be car-free.

[Applause]

And this makes a majority of both parks car-free.

[Applause]

These will be permanent changes, and they will significantly reduce traffic in the park, and make them safer, and quieter, and more enjoyable. Let me just take a moment because, again, success has many fathers and mothers. Let me just take a moment to thank many of the people who are here for being with us today. Thanks to Sue Donoghue, the Prospect Park Alliance president; thanks to Paul White, the executive director of Transportation Alternatives; the inimitable Polly Trottenberg, our transportation commissioner; the very happy Mitchell Silver, our parks commissioner; chief of transportation for the NYPD, Thomas Chan, one of the leaders of our Vision Zero effort; NYPD Central Park commanding officer, Captain Christopher McIntosh; I say with bias – a great commander because he commands the 7-8 Precinct, my own precinct – Captain Frank DiGiacomo; Eddie Falcon, the deputy inspector for NYC Parks Enforcement Patrol; chair of the City Council committee on parks, Mark Levine; Council Member Brad Lander, representing this park; Council Member Mathieu Eugene; and there's a reason I'm not talking about the borough presidents, because they're going to speak in a moment – but they're great people. I'll say more when they speak.

So, a lot of people have looked forward to this day and look forward to us taking further steps in the future. As I said, for my family, Prospect Park means so much. First of all, my family directly relates to Prospect Park because Chirlane and I got married here in Prospect Park, which was a signification step forward for both Chiara and Dante. They both played here. They played little league here. They played on all of these playgrounds – I know them so well. And this park was our front yard, our back yard for so much of our life. And I think for so many New Yorkers, that's the common experience. But the challenge up until now has been – in a place such as Prospect Park – each weekday during the evening rush hour, over 200 vehicles an hour pass through this park – even more in Central Park – and in the evening rush hour in particular is when families are going to the park. It's after school – that's when people come here. And obviously on the weekend, they're here in great numbers. But on the weekdays in particular, the time people come to the park is after school, and as the day progresses. And that's when we've had too much traffic, and we've especially had a problem with that traffic being in the winter months during the hours when it was starting to get dark, which made it even more difficult. Pedestrians, and bicyclists, and motorists were all sharing the same basic space. We've got to end those concerns. We've got to make it better for all involved.

With this action, this means the most car-free, dedicated recreation spaces in these parks since cars were first allowed in the park in 1899. This is the best we have done in 116 years, and we're very proud of that fact.

Unknown: [inaudible]

Mayor: Okay. Thank you. I like that. I like your energy. So these parks were meant to be places of beauty and tranquility. We're taking a big step today to further fulfilling that vision. Quickly in Spanish – I want to get ahead of the rain here.

[Mayor de Blasio speaks in Spanish]

With that, a huge supporter of parks whose invested a lot of resources in parks all over Brooklyn – the borough president of Brooklyn, Eric Adams.

[...]

Mayor: Okay, we're going to take questions on this topic first, then we'll go off topic. Yes?

Question: [inaudible]

Mayor: No, I'm going to let Polly and – or Chief Chan can speak to that as well. I think this has been very well calibrated, based on a lot of study, to ensure that there will be minimal traffic impact. This is something, as you just heard, I've been working on for a decade. And we used to have very real concerns – this has gone in stages – but as we've gone through the stages, I think we've all been very pleasantly surprised there has not been particularly negative traffic impacts. Do you want to speak to that?

Commissioner Polly Trottenberg, Department of Transportation: I can actually take a second on each part. In Central Park, what we're proposing to do is close all the drives north of 72nd, which we've already been doing in the summer time for two years now. And so, we've had a good opportunity to see how it's affected the roadways, and we think it's going be fine. We're going to do some signal adjustments and we're going to extend an express bus lane on Fifth Avenue to help make sure buses can get through. So, we have good experience already with Central Park. And here in Prospect Park, as the mayor has said, the traffic volumes on the West Drive have become only about 200 cars an hour, which we think the local street network can absorb very easily.

Question: Can I follow up on that? [inaudible]

Commissioner Trottenberg: Well, just again, we'll go through both parks. For Central Park, there's still a very high car volume that goes through the – basically, the southern part of the park that touches in the most congested part of Midtown Manhattan. So there, we're still talking – probably more like 400-500 cars per hour. And again, as the mayor has said, as we've progressively made the parks more and more car-free, drivers have found other ways to get around and traffic patterns have changed. But for now, we don't want to spill all those cars onto the street. There are safety considerations to doing that for pedestrians and other motorists. There's also the flow of a lot of bus traffic. So that's why, for now, we're going to take this step of making the great majority of Central Park permanently car-free, but continue to monitor and see how the southern part works. Likewise in Prospect Park, the volumes of cars that are going on the East Drive are twice as high as they are on the West Drive. And there's also the same considerations of those cars on the local streets, a lot of bus traffic, a lot of pedestrians. So, as we now have permanently no cars on the West Drive, that will presumably start to change commuting patterns, and we'll monitor and we'll see. But for now we think, as the mayor said, this is a big, big step. We think making much more of both parks car-free but making sure we're also keeping the surrounding streets – where there will potentially be a lot of congestion and traffic – safe.

Question: [inaudible] less traffic volume [inaudible]?

Commissioner Trottenberg: Again, as we've seen, because we've now been monitoring – we monitor summer levels and have [inaudible] to monitor fall and winter levels – there are certainly traffic increases when school comes back into session. But what we've seen around both parks as we studied the traffic is we think it's very

manageable. And again, when we make a change like this, we work with signal timing and we work with our partners at NYPD to do enforcement. So we're feeling good that we're going to – the traffic levels have gotten pretty low and we're going to manage it well.

Question: [Inaudible] celebrating for the removal of many cars from city parks. Your administration has talked about replacing horse carriages in Central Park with electric cars. Can you explain why regular cars should be out of the park, but it's appropriate for electric cars?

Mayor: Sure. They are very different things. What we're talking about with vehicular traffic is a much higher rate of speed, and obviously we have a lot more of them currently. You heard the numbers just here in Prospect Park per hour. What we aspire to do is to create a small, modest industry with the replica electric cars, or some other good alternative, that will achieve, for tourists, the same kind of things that the horse carriages do today. That would be a negligible impact, both because of the number of vehicles and because they would be going very slowly on purpose, so people can see. You know, that's what they come here to do.

Question: [Inaudible]

Commissioner Trottenberg: Yeah, actually I have a number. In 1991, the peak travel there was 2,500 cars. We're now down to around 400 on the West Drive and around 300 on the East Drive.

Question: [Inaudible]

Commissioner Trottenberg: Yes. Correct. Yes.

Mayor: Okay, on-topic going once. On-topic, going twice. Off-topic, off-topic – yes?

Question: You mentioned more resources earlier, can you explain about that?

Mayor: Sure, in terms of?

Question: Protecting churches.

Mayor: Yes. This is a protocol we have. We certainly had to do this, sadly in the case of attacks on Jewish communities all over the world. And we make it a point to reinforce key community locations when that has occurred. We, in this case, are going to reinforce key African-American religious institutions, and be very watchful for anything that suggests any other type of attack. We have no particular specific evidence that that is in the offing, but it is a precaution that we take consistently with houses of worship.

Question: Does there seem to be any end in sight for the Albany drama?

Mayor: Does there seem to be what?

Question: Any end in sight?

Mayor: Well look, I think folks in Albany have to come to a point of decision and I think there's a lot of pressure on them from their constituents to do so, so I assume they will.

Question: How is the Albany drama affecting the City Council budget negotiations [inaudible] are on hold while you wait for –

Mayor: No. We're too – two things going at the same time. We're continuing daily conversations with the City Council, and that's moving unabated. And those have been very productive.

Question: [Inaudible] a man who allegedly told federal authorities that he pledged allegiance to the terror group ISIL [inaudible] Staten Island [inaudible] I was wondering if you can talk about the incident yesterday and how it [inaudible] your overall terror –

Mayor: Obviously, these efforts [inaudible] by the joint terrorism task force, particularly with the leadership of the FBI. So I want, in terms of any specifics, for you to refer your questions to the FBI and the NYPD. The broad answer is there is an extraordinary and very consistent effort to protect this city – that this is an example of the effectiveness of that effort. And it continues every single day. So I'll let them – I'll let the law enforcement folks speak to the details. But even though I understand why it causes real concern for everyone in this city, I think people should also recognize this is yet another example of our law enforcement officials being entirely on top of the situation and stopping a problem before it happens.

Question: Mr. Mayor, you mentioned earlier that you focused [inaudible] difficulties of mental health. I know that you are a huge supporter of that [inaudible]

Mayor: Absolutely, well in this budget that we look forward to passing in the coming days, there's a substantial increase, I think it's \$78 million dollars in city funding for mental health programs. We understand that so many challenges that we face with mental health in general, and with mental health problems that lead to violence. So many of these, again, are problems that are in many cases, knowable. There are indications early. It's particularly true of our young people. That's why we're so focused on bringing mental health services to our schools, and that will be true in all of our community schools – the new community school program. What I aspire to here, and working obviously very closely with the first lady, who is leading this effort, is to create an actual mental health system in this city. We have a lot of very good work being done at the community level, in terms of mental health. We do not have a fully coordinated system. Our different agencies – NYPD, DOE, corrections, HRA – so many of them have – of course, Department of Health – have an important role to play on mental health. But it's still not coordinated the way it should be. So the first lady and her colleagues are working on this. By the end of the summer, we're going to have a lot more to say on how we're changing the approach. But I think, as a question for this city, this state, for this nation – we've got to look at this interconnection of mental health and acts of violence, and recognize if we don't take proactive approach, we are not protecting people as well as we should. And we have an opportunity to do much better.

Question: Mr. Mayor, have you heard any complaints about landlords trying to take advantage of the expiration –

Mayor: Again, we've had a huge amount of call volume to 3-1-1, and great concerns from tenants. So far, I don't have today's numbers from yesterday about whether there were specific complaints about harassment. But I think the fear is very real because as you saw yesterday with the announcement with the attorney general, even with rent regulation not having expired, we have too many instances of not just harassment or displacement of tenants, but criminal acts in the name of displacing tenants for a profit. We know this problem exists, and it exists on a grand scale. That's why we're putting \$36 million dollars into legal aid to fight it. Some people have every reason to be concerned right now, but we'll keep you updated as the situation unfolds.

Question: Mr. Mayor, the speaker of the City Council said she'll [inaudible] bail fund with or without you. Is she going to have to do it without you?

Mayor: Again, we're in a budget discussion and all items are being discussed. I believe in the need for bail reform, and there's several different ways to do that. We're particularly focused on the – some of the efforts to have a supervised release effort for very low-level crimes that we've seen done effectively before. We don't want to see people going to jail simply because they can't afford a small amount of bail for a minor offense. But there's more than one way to address that issue. We'll continue to work on that with the council.

Question: Mr. Mayor, regarding the Verizon audit that just came out – what power does the city have to actually hold Verizon accountable [inaudible]

Mayor: Like any other franchise agreement, you know, we have an opportunity to follow up legally if other means don't work. So, we have a contract with Verizon. If we are not convinced that they are keeping to that contract, we're going to use every amicable means we have to resolve these issues, and to get them to do what they said they would do and provide broadband access to all New Yorkers who need it. But if that is not happening, we of course reserve the right to take legal action.

Question: Mr. Mayor, back on the bail issue – what alternatives are you proposing [inaudible]?

Mayor: Again, there's a number of proposals out there – Judge Lippman has proposals, the City Council has proposals. I think they're all kindred in that we're all trying to get at this problem of not seeing folks end up on Rikers when there's an appropriate alternative. As I said, the supervised release option is one that we see a lot of evidence of having been very effective for low-level offenses. But we're going to consider anything that we think will work. The council always has the opportunity. If they think something is worthy, they have some resources at their disposal. They obviously will make their own judgment, but we are very adamant about getting to whatever combination of bail reform we think will work.

Question: Mr. Mayor, do you have a message for Albany in regard to rent regulation?

Mayor: Get the job done – that people are waiting and they're understandably deeply concerned because they don't know what the future brings.

We're done. Thank you, everyone.

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