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

Brian Lehrer: It's the Brian Lehrer show on WNYC. Good morning again, everyone. And now our new normal for after the eleven o'clock news on Fridays our weekly Ask the Mayor segment, my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio at 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0, 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0. Used to be our opening segment at ten o'clock on Fridays now to accommodate the Mayor's COVID-19 workflow, Ask the Mayor is now appearing here at 11:05 Friday mornings. Good morning Mr. Mayor. Welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, Brian. How you doing?

Lehrer: Good. And I should remember to say, listeners, you can tweet a question for the Mayor as well, just use the hashtag #AsktheMayor. So we heard in our last segment, I don't know if you were already holding on or listening to any of this at the end, before the news, State Senators from Long Island and the Jersey Shore, their beaches are generally more open, the cities are closed to swimming, so they don't want city residents creating crowds at some of the local town beaches on Long Island, I know that's been a controversy. But Senator Kaminsky from there said two things about you. One is that he would have preferred that there just be a region wide approach. So like what they're doing with social distancing and 50 percent capacity and things like that on the Long Island beaches, the city could have done that for the city beaches too and avoided the conflict. There are plenty of COVID in Nassau County as well. Why didn't the city take a consistent and integrated approach?

Mayor: I know Senator Kaminsky and I respect him. I'm surprised he's not seeing the reality that the city has been the epicenter, not only of the State crisis, but of the national crisis. And yes, there's been a real challenge on Long Island as well, but no one would compare the two. What's happening in New York City unfortunately has been the, you know, the worst, the toughest manifestation of this crisis. We also just don't resemble the reality of Long Island in terms of how we're built. There's 8.6 million people in a very small space, most of whom don't have cars. Most Long Island residents use their cars to get to the beaches. Most New York City residents go by subway or bus which is a problem in it of itself. I've had this conversation with the Nassau County Executive Laura Curran and I think she understands and we've talked about the fact we just have two different realities. I totally respect her decision and she respects mine because we're dealing with two different realities.

So, I just think in some ways people, you know, want to add drama where there doesn't need to be any. The fact is we've taken it on the chin in this crisis, we have to focus on health and safety

first. I'm making my decisions based on health and safety. It is not safe to do what happened in Florida, in California where they prematurely opened up beaches, they had vast crowds just like normal. We're not doing that. That's not safe. If folks in Long Island or New Jersey think they can keep it safe because people get there by car, they have a lot of space to spread out. Great. That's their choice. I respect it, but that doesn't work for us.

Lehrer: And the other thing that he brought up was that he thought you sowed confusion by objecting so strenuously to some of the local town beaches closing to New York City residents like Long Beach and Hampstead Beach and didn't communicate clearly enough that the big public beaches where most New York City residents go when they go to Long Island beaches, specifically Jones Beach and Robert Moses State Park are actually open to city residents. And that should allay most of the concern for you and city residents. What's your response to that?

Mayor: I don't – I think there's a misestimation of what I said. I never made this – again, I didn't try to add any drama to this equation. I tried to make clear why we were doing what we had to do to protect our people in the five boroughs with our beaches. And I said that it was important in any discussion to just be respectful of each other. We're all in this metropolitan area together. I really don't like when people start trying to divide up or point fingers, this is a crisis we should all be working together. So all I talked about was respect for people, but I also respect the decisions that the folks on Long Island are making to try and protect their people and do what works for them. I just don't see a big controversy here. I've said what we have to do for New York City and I've said, I think people in general at this point in time are best served just keeping life local, keeping life in your own neighborhood to the maximum extent possible. We're not going to be able to live exactly the way we live for a while, but this too shall pass, but right now the singular focus should be on health and safety.

Lehrer: And as far as the city beaches, you said this week, “It's just not time for beaches yet. If people want to take a beach chair and sit on the beach, fine. If it starts to seem like a typical summer beach scene, that's what we won't allow”. And there's been some commentary that that's a mixed message, not time for beaches yet in the city, but if you want to take a beach chair and sit on the beach, fine. So, can you help some sun starved of New Yorkers by clarifying that?

Mayor: Yeah, Brian, again, I don't think there's that mixed message in the least because I've been having this conversation with the people in New York City directly for like the whole week. And again, I've sometimes – and deep respect for the good and the free media – but sometimes I also think that truth gets obscured in the search for drama and conflict. I couldn't have been clearer with people, you can't swim, there are not lifeguards on duty, and then all of the things in the State guidance. There's no sports, there's no barbecuing, you know, there's all sorts of things, there's no concessions, it's a different reality. But for folks who particularly live in those neighborhoods, and there's hundreds of thousands of people that are pretty close to our beaches in New York City, if they want to walk on the boardwalk, walk on the sand, you know, sit down in a beach chair, that's fine but they have to observe social distancing, and if they're going for any reason be close to other people, they need to have a face covering on. And as I said just moments before coming on your show, Parks Department will be out there, NYPD will be out there, watching carefully, making sure everything's okay. If we start to see any crowding, we're going to make sure that doesn't happen, obviously. So I think it is straightforward. It's not

business as usual. It is a modified, lesser version of what we would normally do because we cannot allow to have happened what happened in Florida and California. We cannot see people going to the beaches and large numbers, crowding together, we're just not doing that.

Lehrer: Richard, on Staten Island, you're on WNYC with Mayor de Blasio. Hello, Richard.

Question: Good morning. I have a question about the electric – I'm dealing with Con Edison during the summer. We'll probably have a lot more demand during the day since a lot of people would be home, [inaudible] vacations, is the Mayor coordinating this with Con Edison?

Mayor: Richard, thank you. It's a great question and I talked about this a few days back, but we're going to keep talking about it. I think we have two realities happening simultaneously. I agree with you entirely. You got a lot more people at home, a lot more people using air conditioning. That's something we would be concerned about. People who – some of whom might have gone out of the city during summer or on a summer weekend won't be. On the other side of the coin, we're going to have effectively no tourism, which is, you know, a lot of people come into the city in the summer and that's a big deal. We're not going to have during the week people coming in anywhere near the same number for jobs, and I wish they would and I wish they could, but you know, that will be ways off. So you know, a lot of the stores that would be open won't be open. So it's going to be a little bit of a balance. We're going to see more energy usage in some areas, less in others. But I share your concern that we should be prepared for a real surge in demand and that we have to be ready with Con Edison.

Last year, I was not pleased at all with Con Edison. I thought they did not communicate before problems that could have been anticipated. They did not coordinate well with the city. They did not help people know what to do in time. We learned a lot from that. There's a much more communicative situation. We're working constantly with them now. If there is any problem, as soon as it's starting to emerge, we want to tell people about it so they can make adjustments, use less air conditioning or whatever it is to stop any potential break in the electricity. And they added a lot more equipment in some of the places that were particularly vulnerable, particularly parts of Brooklyn, updated the equipment. So, I am more hopeful going into this summer that we're better positioned but like you, I want to watch very carefully to see what the demand levels are. And look, Richard, if we get to a problem where demand starts to go up too much, we're going to tell people this is what you need to do, these adjustments you need to make so we don't end up with a blackout our hands and no one wants that and generally people do make quick adjustments when they hear those kinds of messages.

Lehrer: Do you have – do your people have a projection like whether the extra demand by people staying at home is going to outweigh the lower demand that you mentioned because people aren't going to office buildings or the other way around?

Mayor: We are working on that. I think that the X factors right now, Brian, are where we will be in the restart at that moment when things heat up more. So right now, as I said moments ago before joining your show, I think in the first or second week of June we'll do the first step, which is construction, manufacturing, wholesale and curbside pickup for retail. So that will mean some greater energy usage by those sectors. But the question going into the hottest months, going into

July, August, you know what we definitely again, we will not see any appreciable tourism, obviously. So that takes a big piece out of the equation. Remember, you know the last time we counted we had 67 million tourists in a year. So that's a big change. We obviously know some people have taken a period of time where they're going to stay out of the city. That's a part of the equation too. So we're working on trying to hone it, but there's still some big open questions. I think the most important thing from my point of view is that we have a better strategic approach with Con Ed and that the one place where they had a structural problem, not just a you know, an unexpected specific piece of equipment that malfunctioned, but a structural problem wasn't a part of Brooklyn and their Flatbush network in Brooklyn and that has been substantially upgraded. So that gives me a little more confidence going into this summer.

Lehrer: Denise in Manhattan. You're on WNYC with Mayor de Blasio. Hi, Denise.

Question: Hi, Brian. Good morning Mr. Mayor. This is a two-part question, comments. First as a shout out to all our sanitation worker, they are like Rodney Dangerfield, they don't get any respect. Like we all know that they're the first line of defense in public health.

Lehrer: [Inaudible] anyway. Yes?

Question: Okay, and the second part, I said that to say this for transparency, I'm a longtime composter and I'm asking the Mayor to consider encouraging composting's return. For one thing, decaying vegetable matter causes methane. So it's an ecological thing. And the other thing is my garbage has increased in weight since I started putting what vegetable waste in it, and I multiplied this by households and neighborhoods and boroughs and I feel for our sanitation workers. Let's do some composting and get some of the weight out of the garbage that you have to carry.

Lehrer: Denise, thank you very much. So, Mr. Mayor, Denise is retro for referring to Rodney Dangerfield and –

Mayor: Yes.

Lehrer: Policy forward by being concerned about composting. Interesting combination.

Mayor: Denise has range. All right. You know, Denise, first of all, sanitation workers. I – you just inspired me to make sure that in one of my daily updates that I give them the praise because they've been amazing during this crisis, and a lot of times I get to thank them and praise them during snowstorms and kind of dramatic moments where they come through but this has been one where they've every day been out there doing great work. So I'm going to make sure to do that. On the composting, I want to give you a mixed decision on that. Right now, I would love nothing more than to get us to go to a much higher level of composting. And that's what we were planning on. It's all going to come down honestly to what happens with the federal stimulus. If we get the kind of support that we need, we can have a serious conversation about composting. Again, if we don't, it's going to be one of the things that we just can't consider essential compared to the basics right now. We're literally thinking about people's safety, people's health, making sure people have enough food to eat, and you know, a roof over their head. Like that's the four

things that are obsessing me every day and my team because for so many New Yorkers, those things are not secure right now. So, you know, if our economic situation, our fiscal situation improves, composting gets back into discussion. If it doesn't, it's not going to, and that's just the honest truth. But one day, you know, I hope to see this city do it on a city wide level intensely because I think it would be the right thing for our future and certainly for the environment.

Lehrer: Well, a listener also writes about this quote, “they've halted curbside pickups of organics” - that's what you're just referring to – “but also the drop-off points in community gardens and farmer's markets. At the farmer's markets, people are lining up six feet apart to buy stuff, so it seems feasible to allow that for organics drop-offs”, righteous listener.

Mayor: And that is one piece of the equation is the logistics. But Brian, remember when we had to put our budget in place in April, right as this whole crisis was emerging, we had to look at both the logistics and the reality of whether people could gather and whether people could do certain things going forward, but also the money. We are missing \$7.4 billion. It's an astounding amount of money and it's going to get worse. I want to be very blunt about that. The revenue loss – and you're seeing what's happening with the economy, you're seeing what's happening with unemployment – the revenue situation is only going to get worse, and I'm very sorry to say that everything costs money. Composting programs are very, very valuable, but it costs money. If there is no money and you have to make real or much less money, you have to make tough, tough choices. We're going to focus on, again, health, safety, food, shelter. That's where our focus is until we can get to a much better place.

Lehrer: Cassius in Brooklyn, your own WNYC with a Mayor. Hello, Cassius.

Question: Hey guys. Well, Mayor, you were just talking exactly to the, you know, the point I wanted to bring up – what are we going to do? Are we going to let every business that isn't a supermarket or bodega get destroyed in this city? But we're doing so much damage to our economy. It's – we need a much more surgical approach to dealing with this, that the elderly are the ones who are the most vulnerable to this virus, we need to find a way to protect them and protect the workers who serve them. We have to get all businesses back open. We're on the precipice of, you know, destroying the whole city, basically.

Mayor: Cassius, I respect the question. I can tell it's a very hard sell, but I couldn't disagree more with that core analysis and I just want to lay it out to you real simple. Of course, you're right. When you say, can we focus on particular efforts to protect the elderly within any strategy so that that in effect gives us more freedom to reopen businesses? I think there's an absolute truth in that – whatever we do going forward is going to come with particular protections for folks who are much older and folks who have those preexisting conditions or both. But we are looking at around the world at what has worked and what hasn't worked, and rushing back is consistently been proven to have the boomerang effect and make things worse and cause bigger shutdowns, because it is not just about the small number of particularly vulnerable people. It is about both this way this disease can spread and it is having an impact on a wide range of ages if they have preexisting conditions. We're obviously very concerned about what we've seen lately with the MIS-C, the impact on some kids, it's been a very limited number so far, but we're worried about that. So the health care ramifications are not just for the very old, but more importantly, if you

have a resurgence, you then threaten the ability of your health care system to function, and so the reason all of us have gone through all of this is that we have to keep the basics of public health together. The next moves can be fast and aggressive if people are disciplined and keep doing what they're doing on the shelter-in-place and the social distancing.

So, I've said in the first or second week of June, we expect at this point, barring any setback to reopen manufacturing, construction, curbside pickup, retail and wholesale, that actually is hundreds of thousands of jobs. We did an estimate that's over half a million jobs in the city in those areas. If all goes well, those restart in the first half of June, and then if we can get through that phase effectively, we go to a whole additional set of businesses that can reopen. So you're talking about as we go into the summer, you could see a very, very big increase in economic activity. But one that would have to be in a sustainable manner in terms of our health situation. If we do that right, then you steadily reopen and you stick to it. If you do it wrong, you shut down, you go backwards. You put back on restrictions. So one that is the smart play to know, I've talked to lots and lots of business leaders that especially the smallest businesses are very worried about their futures, understandably, but they also are hanging on and they know that could be a matter of months that they'll be back in action, and there's going to be a lot of pent up demand. A lot of people who are going to be buying local, and as I talked to people in sort of medium and bigger businesses, they fully intend to come back. They're waiting for the right safe environment, the right guidelines, and they're ready to go. So I don't buy – I'm not saying your question isn't heartfelt, but there's been a kind of doom-saying tendency in some places lately, but the history of New York City shows the ability of New York City and its businesses to come back very strong. Look at the fiscal crisis, look at 9/11, look at Sandy. Over and over again you see people coming back strong.

Lehrer: It may be too late after a while for some of the small businesses who run out of money. I see that you're going to allow, however religious gatherings of up to 10 people. Now that's not more than would be together at any one time in a lot of small businesses like retail in New York. Could you give some more details on exactly under what conditions and is this special treatment for religious as opposed to other institutions? If public safety is paramount in public policy, why make a religious exemption for 10 people if you're not doing it for, let's say, small businesses?

Mayor: So, Brian, I want to be careful with the use of the word you. I respect you greatly and you know it and I respect this show, but I'll always let you know and I think you're missing a fact: that dictate came from the State of New York, not from me. We respect the State, we work with the State, we're going to –

Lehrer: Got it. So that is my confusion. So I will acknowledge that. Okay, so that's a state – do you disagree with that State policy?

Mayor: I think the best way to look at this is to generalize whatever approach, and I know the State is looking at that too right now. So the fact is we've been really cautious about gatherings and, you know, what I've set up to date is I would like to keep them even smaller, but we can live with that. We can work with a 10 person gathering rule. So long as folks understand that it means no more than 10 people. It means still keeping distance among people still using face coverings unless everyone lives under the same roof. It's about discipline and every time that people do

things the right way, they're helping us get out of this crisis so I can live with that standard. The State is working on, we're waiting to see updated executive orders on exactly how it would be applied.

Lehrer: Now, that you've clarified for me whose order it is I have questions for Governor Cuomo, I guess. But upstate is in a phase one reopening and various places that the city isn't ready for. But you're telling me the Governor is imposing this 10 people may gather for religious purposes, even in the city.

Mayor: Yeah, there are different things that apply to different places and then there are some things that are universal, and again, I feel very comfortable. I want to really make this clear. Governor and I have agreed overwhelmingly throughout this crisis, our teams talk constantly throughout the day. We've been very, very much aligned on general direction. New York City is the toughest situation of the whole state. So I'm always going to be a little more conservative and I would like to keep people, you know, avoiding any kind of gatherings that could start to enlarge because there is a human instinct. If you have 10 people could turn into 12 people, 15 people, 20 people. We can't let that happen. So I'm a little more conservative on this one, but the bottom line is we're going to work with the guidance. If it's 10 people, it's a perfectly workable level, and you know, we also, again, I'm hoping, and I believe right now, if the indicators stay consistent, that we're talking just a few weeks until we go into the same phase one the rest of the state has gone into.

Lehrer: Jill and Queens. You're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi Jill. Jill, are you there? Jill?

Mayor: You got to turn off your radio cause you're hearing the delay.

Lehrer: Yeah, that's right, you got to turn off your radio cause you're hearing the delay Let's see if we need to get back to Jill in a minute. Jill. In three, Jill in two. Jill in one. You're there yet Jill?

Question: Yeah.

Lehrer: Oh, we did it. Hi, you're on the air with the Mayor. Go ahead.

Question: Hi. I have a question that hasn't been clarified and I'm sure I'm not the only person with the same problem. So my driver license has been suspended for failing to show up to traffic court appearance during the pause order and I can't get through to the DMV in Albany by phone, and the only way to lift the suspension is to pay the additional \$70 penalty. So do you have any advice?

Mayor: Yeah, Jill, first of all, if you would give your information WNYC, we'll have our team follow up with you now. Just Brian always help you and your listeners to know we do not run the Department of Motor Vehicles. That's the State of New York and we do not run the court system, that's the State of New York. But if it's happening to a New York City resident, I care about it. So certainly don't want to see people have their licenses suspended, if there's some alternative we can come up with. Yeah, of course the court systems have had to close in this crisis, but if

someone needs to drive their car that we should see if there's a legitimate way to address it. So Jill, I'll make sure someone follows up with you today and then it will also help us figure out if there's something we can do to solve this problem in the short term for anyone else in the same situation.

Lehrer: Jill, hang on. We will take your contact information.

I want to ask you about the Columbia University study that's making news with their model that finds 36,000 lives could have been saved nationally and most of them are in New York, if you are the Governor or the federal government had started the social distancing rules just one week earlier, March 8th, rather than March 15th. There were people calling for you to act. I asked you about the schools and the St. Patrick's Day Parade here on March 6th, as late as March 13th, the Times had a headline, de Blasio stays firm on keeping New York City schools open as outbreak spreads, attendance plunged in New York City schools and the number of coronavirus cases, cases climbed above 400. Did the public health officials not have your ear?

Mayor: We talked constantly, Brian, constantly, and I can't tell you how many meetings calls, et cetera. Look, we all, and I think everyone would say this, who was involved in these discussions. We had some information we had nowhere near the information we have now. Remember, we didn't even have testing to be able to know what was going on, and now, you know, it turns out this is information that's all emerged since then. This disease might've been well established in the city in February, maybe even in late January. We didn't know that. We were trying to get the ability, the right to test from the federal government. We couldn't get that for the longest time. The first identified verified case in New York City was March 1st. The first death was March 14th and it was March 15th that I shut down the schools. March 15th I said we were going to shut down the bars and restaurants. March 17th, I called for shelter and place the State finally decided to do that a few days later. I was one of the first public officials in the country to call for shelter in place. So look, I wish we had known in February and the beginning of March what we know now, and the conversations were constant and different information was put forward and there were different viewpoints, which is also normal in the situation, amongst all my senior team members, you know, people with all sorts of different expertise had different viewpoints and we were trying to make the right decision.

Lehrer: San Francisco had jumped ahead of us with fewer cases. How do you look back on that comparison?

Mayor: Again? I wish we had the information we have now. It's – I feel – look, every one of us and I certainly feel this, you know, you can't help but see what's happening, and say if only we had known more, we would have done a lot of things differently. But the challenge here, Brian, is the questions we've heard today about, you know, the fact that people have lost their livelihoods. The fact that businesses, as you said, some may not come back. Obviously the problem of our kids are not getting the same kind of education they would have gotten. I know I was worried and I know the Governor was worried about what a shutdown would mean and the long-term ramifications of it and that was when we thought we could contain the damage. No one, no one I think saw this getting to the state where you're now comparing to the Great Depression in terms of economic impact.

We all were trying to make sense of an ever-changing situation with much too limited information and trying to see if we could contain it, which is the other thing I think is being left out of the discussion – for days and days we held the hope that we could still contain this when it was a limited number of cases. Remember we did not have our first death until March 14th and we thought we could potentially beat it back without, you know, forcing everyone in the city to lose their livelihood. But it's a situation we'll have plenty of time to review everything going forward. Right now we're actually right in the middle of this crisis still and we've got to save lives and we've got to protect people and we've got to make the right moves going forward to avoid a boomerang of this disease. So that's where I'm going to be focused on. That will be definitely time later to assess what happened in the past and learn from it.

Lehrer: Last thing, and we're going to be at a time in a minute, appropriate to Memorial Day, which I think it's fair to say, it's not just for members of the military who've died this year. You're asking the state, I believe for a line of duty benefits for city workers who have died of coronavirus. Can you give us more details on what exactly and for whom?

Mayor: Yes, absolutely Brian, and thank you for asking. You know, we're talking about hundreds of really good people, New Yorkers who were serving their fellow New Yorkers, civil servants, public employees, first responders, public health care workers, but also people served us in lots of other ways, and to me, they're all people we value and we miss and we honor and we honor their families, and so I came to the conclusion that even though we saw some progress in Washington in terms of including in the stimulus support for the families of first responders who were lost we did not see the kind of consistent support that these families would need. So I've said, I want to see the State Legislature provide full line of duty death benefits for any city worker who died because of COVID during this crisis.

Lehrer: Mr. Mayor, thank you as always, I hope you have a safe Memorial Day weekend. Any observances that you're planning personally?

Mayor: Well we're going to figure that out. But again, like so many New Yorkers it's going to be low key and very local and keep it simple and with a real sense of remembering why Memorial Day exists, honoring those who served us and gave their lives for us.

Lehrer: Talk to you next week. Thanks a lot.

Mayor: Thank you, Brian.

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