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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall, as we turn our focus to the city's vaccination efforts. With the COVID-19 vaccine supply quickly dwindling, the City today announced that it will postpone the expansion of mass vaccination sites at Citi Field and Yankee Stadium. I spoke with Mayor de Blasio, a short time about the vaccine shortage and much more. Here's our conversation. Mr. Mayor, good to see you.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good to see you, Errol. How you doing?

Louis: Just fine. Thanks. Let's start with some COVID talk. According to Governor Cuomo, the latest positive test rate for COVID-19 in New York State was 5.47 percent, which is hopeful. The numbers are in decline and according to Cuomo, the State can ease some coronavirus restrictions this week, but that doesn't include indoor dining here in the five boroughs. And I guess I'm trying to get a sense of where we're at. About a month ago, you had voiced concern that there might be additional shutdowns. So where do things stand right now?

Mayor: Look, we're constantly assessing the information. This all has to be about the data and the science. Right now, there's real concern about these new variants that we're dealing with. Our health care leadership's watching that real carefully, but the biggest x-factor is the vaccine. That could be the game changer obviously, but we don't have the supply. And I think it's hard to project that things are going to be okay in the short term until we get a reliable supply of vaccine. So, I think right now it's like day to day, trying to constantly watch the numbers, make the right decisions until we get the thing we really need, which is supply, supply, supply. We need a constant and reliable supply of the vaccine from the federal government, from the manufacturers.

Louis: There was a story by the news organization, The City, estimating that 28 percent of the people who have gotten vaccinations are actually not New Yorkers. They live outside the city, they work outside the city. It's not clear that they were even eligible. They appear to have hacked our system. What level of concern do you have about that? Because 28 percent is a pretty high number.

Mayor: Yeah, and that's not the information I have, Errol. What I have is that we have a huge group of people who serve us whether it's first responders, whether it's educators, whether it's folks who work in our hospitals, and a lot of them live in the five boroughs, but some of them don't, but they serve us here in New York City. That's the group of people that we certainly welcomed to get vaccinated. So, I have not heard of many instances of folks who live outside the city and are not part of that group of sort of public servants of one kind or another. Folks who work in a hospital – if you work in a New York City hospital, and you're serving the people in

your city, I don't care whether you're a New York City resident or you live in the suburbs or you live in New Jersey or if you live in Connecticut, if you're serving us, of course, I want to see you vaccinated. That's the kind of person I know of who's gotten vaccinated even if they don't live here.

Louis: Are we operating on a kind of an honor system? If somebody says, you know, they use a friend's address in Brooklyn or Queens to get the vaccine. Is there any real effort to confirm that?

Mayor: Yeah, there is a real effort to make sure that people – I mean, people have to show evidence of the address when they are coming for the vaccine. Obviously if you say, “Hey, I live on 11th Street in Brooklyn,” you can't have a driver's license that has, you know, Scarsdale on it, right? I mean, there are real efforts to do those checks – or if you say, you know, I live in Scarsdale, but I work at Montefiore, you know, you got to be able to provide some evidence. That has been the concept from the beginning to both ask people up front, do you fit the standards, but also confirm it.

Louis: Okay, and just to be clear, there are a number of private organizations that are doing their screening. You can control what you can control through Health + Hospitals, but there other organizations that are doing it on their own?

Mayor: That's absolutely true. We've certainly tried to get everyone on the same page about the fact that we need to serve people in New York City who live in New York City or serve New York City. I'm not going to say that that's the – you know, without any exception. But I can say to you very clearly, you know, a huge percentage of the vaccinations are the ones that we control directly, or we have a lot of visibility in, so far, what I'm hearing is it really tracks with you're either a resident or you're someone who serves the people of the five boroughs.

Louis: Okay. A number of non-nonprofit leaders have urged you to reauthorize the \$25 million in emergency funding for food pantries that was put into place last spring. Where does that stand and are you likely to renew that?

Mayor: Look, the big picture is what matters here to begin with. I said from the very beginning of this crisis, we're not going to let any New Yorker go hungry. And I've talked to so many people in neighborhoods all over the city who are really worried because they lost their income, they need to know there's a place they can turn for food. We've always provided the resources for soup kitchens, food pantries, we've been doing direct delivery to seniors who couldn't get out of their house. And again, a reminder all your viewers – if anyone knows someone who doesn't have enough food or you yourself don't have enough food, call 3-1-1 for locations near you, local schools and other locations, or delivery if you require delivery. But any need we're going to meet, we'll certainly go and talk to the Council about what to do on these next concerns they have.

Louis: On a different level of hunger, the City Council is taking up a measure to expand street vendor permits which presumably would include food vendors. Do you support this bill? And if passed will you sign it? This is a major expansion 3,000 to 4,000 new permits, biggest expansion in about 40 years.

Mayor: There's been a really good dialogue, Errol, on this legislation. When I said – you might remember this was actually something that got a lot of focus back at the end of the last City Council term, and I said, hey, here's what matters to me. I certainly want to see more opportunities for vendors. This is one of the ways that people get their start and build up their own business, especially for immigrant New Yorkers. I want to see really clear enforcement standards because we haven't had that sufficiently in the past and, you know, follow through on the enforcement. And I want to see protections for bricks and mortar stores like that at the stores, the everyday mom-and-pop stores in our neighborhood that we need them to survive, especially after everything they've been through in this pandemic. So, what I've seen of this legislation – and our team has been working closely with the City Council – is that balance has been struck. So, I'm pleased with what I see so far. I'm sure there'll be hearings and more discussion, but I'm pleased at what I see so far.

Louis: When it comes to small businesses, many of which have been closed for nearly a year now, would they at least at first crack at some of those permits?

Mayor: I don't think it's about small businesses per se, the permits being attached to a brick and mortar store, for example. If you're saying folks who have lost a store would they have an opportunity, they certainly have an opportunity to vie for it. I don't know, honestly, if the legislation gives them a preference or not. It's a good question and something I'll certainly follow up on. But what I'm talking about is the stores that, thank God, the vast majority of our neighborhood stores have survived, making sure that they do not end up in a situation where there's additional drain on their customer base from, you know, a vendor selling the exact same thing right outside their door. We want to make sure there's some balance here. Give street vendors opportunity, but also protect the ability of those brick and mortar stores to keep going, especially with everything they've been through lately.

Louis: Yeah. I mean that, of course, is one of those concerns is that I think out of the existing regulations, a vendor can set up as close as 20 feet from the entrance of a brick and mortar store, which, of course, are already under a lot of pressure with the limited number people who can come inside and the other food establishments that have to serve outside. It starts to look like there may be quite a lot of conflict out there on the street.

Mayor: Well, look, I hope there will not be because there'll be smart enforcement to make sure that people are where they're supposed to be. And now that's going to be handled by the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection. That's a really important change we've made as we tried to really focus on what are the things the NYPD should focus on and specialize in. And what are the things that could be done by civilian agencies. The Department of Consumer and Worker Protection will be the enforcement entity for street vendors. And that will include if they're setting up at a place that isn't appropriate or of course, if they're not an actual licensed vendor. I think that will help us to keep the right balance.

Louis: We are going to take a short break here. I'll bring the rest of my conversation with Mayor de Blasio in just a minute.

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Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall, where we're bringing you my interview with Mayor de Blasio. Here's part two of this week's conversation:

Mr. Mayor, I wanted to ask you about the SHSAT. Since the pandemic, we have suspended alternate-side parking, and sales and income tax collections, and rents, and evictions, and mortgage payments – and here's this discriminatory test that not only has to stay in place, but people actually have to show up in person to take it. Did you consider simply suspending the test?

Mayor: Yeah, Errol, we're trying in everything we do to strike a balance. Obviously, schools have been open, so I appreciate the way you framed the question. I don't happen to agree with it, but I understand what you're saying. But, come on. Schools have been open for months and months. We're able to do a test like this safely. We did not have a coherent replacement system at this point. And obviously this has been something I think should be fundamentally changed, but we can't do it properly without the state legislature, and there just isn't the consensus there yet. So, this is one where, of course, if we had a safe way to do it, we would, and we do.

Louis: Well, unlike elementary school students, the middle schoolers who are going to take the exam have not been regularly tested, right? I mean, they, you can screen them a little bit, I guess, take their temperature or something, but is there another way to deal with those health concerns?

Mayor: The schools – again, we're still talking about school buildings where we're absolutely secure about the safety of those buildings. It's been proven over and over again, and in the end, you know, there are some things where there aren't perfect solutions in life. We didn't have a good alternative, and I was convinced based on everything I've heard from my health team and my education team that it could be done safely. I don't agree with the test, you know that. I wish, you know, we – I wish we had handled the effort to change that test better, and I wish there had been more receptivity in the legislature, but sometimes, you know, you got to keep doing the best you can with what you got, and this was the best we could do under these circumstances.

Louis: Will changing the use of the test or changing or suspending the test itself be on your legislative agenda this session?

Mayor: Look, I think it should be, but it would be fair to say that there are so many other things that have to be dealt with in Albany that I don't see a context for Albany to focus on this right now. I would love it if they would, but I want to be a realist about this. I hope it is a discussion in the mayoral campaign. I hope people talk about this because this is a broken status quo, and again, I'm the first to say, Errol, I wish I had approached the effort to change it differently. I learned some valuable lessons to say the least, but that just because our first effort to change it didn't work, doesn't mean this issue should go away. That the status quo with the specialized high schools doesn't work. We need something very different going forward.

Louis: And for those who are determined to take it, my understanding is there'll be a makeup date for those who either are unable or unwilling to show up in person this week?

Mayor: That's right. There's going to be another date early in February just to give people alternatives just in case.

Louis: Okay. Today, Mr. Mayor, you announced an effort to divest \$4 billion from companies that deal with fossil fuel. Are efforts being taken to make sure that the pension funds, and the public workers who rely on them, don't suffer losses as a result of that decision?

Mayor: Oh, of course, Errol. From the very beginning, when we announced this several years ago, we said that we were convinced we could protect the earth, fight climate change, protect our children's futures, but also protect our retirees, and here's the deal: the fossil fuel companies are not a good bet. They're just not a good investment, their assets are going to be stranded in the ground. So in fact, there's plenty of better investments to make. From everybody I've talked to on our team and the other folks that are related to the pension funds, there's no problem finding better investments because fossil fuel investments just aren't that good at this point.

Louis: By way of analogy, it was the massive private investment in pharmaceutical companies, which are very problematic for a lot of different reasons, but it was the billions and billions of dollars that they had on hand that enabled them to quickly create a vaccine in record time and essentially save civilization, I think it's only a slight exaggeration. Were there or are there any such possibilities with fuel companies to say, well, listen, we've got \$4 billion at stake here. Why don't you fast track some alternative fuel programs?

Mayor: Well, I would say that's not a bad question, except for the history of those companies. They have lied about the effects of global warming for years. They have built up the problem, rather than addressing it when they could have and should have. I don't think they're good actors. So I know, you know, a number of them are now realizing they'd better move over to renewables before it's too late. But I think our best bet is to get away from the people who overtly created the problem and put investments in the companies that are specifically focused on renewables and have a track record of building up renewable energy. That – if we think about it this way, let's flood those companies with the money they need to speed up their research, speed up the creation of their products. That's a much better bet for the future.

Louis: When you and I were both in college, one of the questions on the table was whether or not one should engage economically in this sense with companies doing business in Apartheid, South Africa. The lines were drawn a little bit differently, but the same basic logic of a socially responsible investment was driving a lot of the decisions. Is this analogous to that, do you think?

Mayor: To some extent, I'd say, look, I think that divestment movement related to South Africa had a big impact, and look, we understand that when you fight for divestment, it doesn't solve the whole problem, but it sure changes people's minds and it changes people's priorities, and I would say it's a great analogy on that level. The divestment effort, it may have started small, I mean, it started on certain campuses, but it really built up a momentum, and it was one of the reasons that South Africa didn't have the ability to hide from the international community and had to ultimately change its racist Apartheid ways. I would make the analogy here. These fossil fuel companies have made out like bandits. You know, they've gotten every conceivable form of government tax cut, and they've deeply harmed the earth and our people. Let's turn the tables and say, we don't want to do business with you anymore, and that's going to force a lot of resources to flow towards renewables and force the fossil fuel companies to do something different just the way the South African government had to do something different.

Louis: Earlier today. President Biden announced that he's going to try and convert the entire federal fleet to the extent possible to electric cars which is a way of both of boosting the alternative energy sector, as well as migrating away from fossil fuels. Have you considered something similar for New York City?

Mayor: Yeah, that is what we're doing. All of the cars in the New York City fleet are being converted to electric over the buying cycles. There are certain exceptions for emergency vehicles, for example, in some cases, but our goal is electric cars and then more and more electric trucks as well, and I certainly, we're trying to push every button to speed up the conversion of our total city fleet to electric in the coming years, and we're going to put up public electric vehicle charging stations, not just for public vehicles, but for the whole people of New York City, to encourage people to choose electric vehicles and know there's going to be more and more places where they can get them charged. That's something I committed to several years ago. That's going to be an ongoing large effort by the City of New York.

Louis: Yeah, I considered electric vehicles for a hot minute until I realized there was no place to charge the darn things, which makes it, you know, it's already hard enough to deal with the vehicle in the city.

Mayor: But you're going to be seeing more and more of those charging stations that are going to be available to the whole public over these next few years. So, you'll have an opportunity to change your mind, Errol.

Louis: And speaking of energy, that forecast shows a small winter storm could be moving into night. Our meteorologists who are the best in the business say that we're expecting less than one inch. I'm wondering if your folks are telling you something similar.

Mayor: Well, my folks were saying something similar, but I, you see these gray hairs, they came from believing the National Weather Service too specifically or too literally, you know. We have found – it's not the National Weather Service fault. Mother nature will throw you a curve ball every time. So, I remember some of our worst storms started out, sounded like they were only going to be a few inches, and then we got a very rude awakening. We've canceled alternate-side for tomorrow as a precaution. We're assuming something substantially bigger, just so we're ready. We're going to be warning people as the snow is hitting tomorrow into Wednesday to stay off the streets, the maximum extent possible. It is so much better to be too ready than not ready enough.

Louis: Okay. We'll hope for the best. Thanks very much, Mr. Mayor. We'll see you next week.

Mayor: Thank you, Errol. Take care now.

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