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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. It's Monday, and that means Mayor de Blasio is here for our weekly discussion. He is just back from a trip down to the Big Easy, New Orleans. Good evening, Mr. Mayor. How was New Orleans?

Mayor Bill de Blasio: It was amazing. Progressive leaders from all over the country, and I can tell you this much Errol. There is some real energy on the ground to change the way we do things all over this country, it's amazing. I spoke to a lot of my fellow mayors, folks all over the country, governors, all sorts of folks who – by the way a lot of them are looking at examples from New York City. Like with what we've done with pre-K, what we've done with neighborhood policing. They're taking inspiration from that. But we're also gaining a lot of great ideas from other places. But most importantly what I think you see is the kind of thinking that is going to change what's possible, and this is what's so exciting to me – pushing the spectrum, changing the debate. More conservative folks actually did this really, really well around the time when Ronald Reagan and after it to change what was possible in the public mind what progressives are doing more and more now. And I saw that really in action when I was in New Orleans.

Louis: What's the thing you think is the most exciting thing about what's possible that wasn't considered possible before?

Mayor: I think there's an entirely different discussion going on about – for example taxing the wealthy in a way that's fair and appropriate. I think that whole discussion that led to the tax bill in Washington kind of had an interesting boomerang effect. Now people are talking about how to repeal that legislation. Remember, that legislation was horrible for New York City, and New York State. It took away state and local deductibility. There's a huge movement out there building to go back and repeal that obviously with a different Congress. Take away that legislation that was a giveaway to the wealthy and to corporations, restore state and local deductibility and think more deeply about what real progressive taxation looks like in this country because that is going to give us the kinds of resources that we need to make a real change.

Louis: Well, yeah, is it a fully fleshed out theory or is it more like look we need money to do different things like education, infrastructure. There are rich people we need a good source, which isn't really a fully fleshed out theory of how to keep the economy booming.

Mayor: I don't think that people have thought about every single element of how to have an ideal economy, but I do think the building blocks are there. That you need to reorder the way we think about revenue. Right now we took a step in the wrong direction away from progressive taxation with the law that was passed recently. Again, that can and must be repealed. But then you go farther, for example one of the notions that's been out there for the last couple of years, a trillion dollar infrastructure plan. That's only possible if you achieve that repeal particularly speaking. But upon achieving that repeal, putting that money into something like infrastructure would be a smart investment particularly for places like New York. You know, I've talked to a lot of people about pre-K, and early childhood education. This is something that's gaining real energy around the country. I talked to some of my colleagues who are really making it more and more of a priority. Think about that at a national level. Think what it would mean for the country to have Pre-K become the norm all over this country. What it would mean educationally, what it would mean in terms of kids not ending up in some of the troubles that they do later in life. So I think the whole discussion is changing. Is it a perfect plan yet? No. But I think the whole discussion is changing.

Louis: Okay, very interesting. On the practical side of things we are somewhere in the 90 day range between now and the primaries and – your endorsements? You've talked about forming a PAC, you've talked about—

Mayor: I have formed a PAC.

Louis: Getting involved in some New York races. You have formed a PAC.

[Laughter]

Louis: And you've talked about sort of getting out there and sort of intervening in some races. I want to – if you don't have specific races to talk about, what kind of district will a Bill de Blasio make a difference in?

Mayor: Look, I would separate for a moment, you know, the primaries from the general. Primaries, I'm going to get involved, I'm obviously going to decide that real soon, but the good news is that most people don't pay attention until the few weeks before the election. Uh, general election, we're 90 days or so out, there's still plenty of time. Look when you think about people around the country, obviously, some of them would like me to come in and campaign with them, others, their first need is for resources and that's what they need most; that's what I'm going to help them to do. It really depends. Each candidacy is different. And you know what I've always said, if you really want to support someone, you ask them a simple question: how can I help you? What do you need?

Louis: What are they telling you?

Mayor: Some say I'd love for you to come out and campaign and draw attention to what we're doing, and validate it. Others say hey, I'd really like you to focus on resources. Some say both. But what I'm going to do in the coming days is decide on some of the elections in this state. I'm certainly going to making choices about which elections to be involved with around the country. And we'll get rolling out as each decision is made and as each specific action is determined.

Louis: I noticed you were, um – well, that Cynthia Nixon was also at the Netroots gallery in New Orleans. I'm wondering if you'd made a decision in her case. I'll obviously be letting you know when that has happened. She was on a different day, although I understand she was certainly well received there.

Mayor: Okay. Let's move on to something related to elections, which is, I understand, you're going to do something you must know is going to get you in some trouble politically. Which is to—

Mayor: You're reveling in this, you relish this!

Louis: Well, no, no, well you know what I appreciate it, I appreciate it, because it's so easy and I've, you know, I've spent decades covering people who do the easy thing. This is a not so easy thing. You've decided to go and use the resources of your office and the Board of Elections to make sure that people who are in detention, in the jail system, on Rikers Island, are registered to vote.

Mayor: Yep. Look, we are in a moment – I think this is an inflection point in this country on two topics that now merge in this issue. On democracy, there's a growing understanding that our democracy is hurting, that we have to absolutely change our approach to getting people to participate. We've got to open up the democratic process and encourage people – and right now, particularly in a state like New York, we're doing the exact opposite. You can't register on the day of the election. There's no early voting. Everything is backward here and that needs to be fixed. But then there's the question of mass incarceration. More and more in this country I think there's an understanding that mass incarceration movement, that time in history was horribly broken, to get out of that we have to focus on never letting people go to jail to begin with but also, God forbid, someone does go to jail make sure they don't come back. One of the best ways is to engage them as citizens and productive, positive members of society, and voting is one of the ultimate expressions of that. So, but for people serving time for a felony or on parole for a felony in the state, everyone else has a right to vote. Most people in Rikers, of course, are there for either a very short time for a sentence, or awaiting their determination by the criminal justice system, by the adjudication of their case. Why should they in effect be cut out of our democratic process?

So what we found over the years, you know, there really wasn't any effort to help them vote. There were no real absentee ballot efforts or registration efforts. From now on, we're going to change that all. For the first time in the history of this city, there will be ongoing voter registration on Rikers Island and in the whole corrections system. There will be efforts to give absentee ballots to inmates for the districts they come from and a real effort to encourage voting and to recognize it as part of getting back in swing of being a positive—

Louis: Okay, so you, in fact, you partially answered what my next question was going to be which was that: are they going to use, say, Rikers Island, as the address, I guess the answer to that is no—

Mayor: It's the home address, whatever they're home neighborhood is.

Louis: In some ways, it should be harder to do this than it is, meaning, I think in the fiscal year 2017 number, from your Department of Corrections, was that the average stay on Rikers and the related houses of detention is 63 days. I've seen some reporting suggesting that it's considerably longer and closer to a half-year, but it really should be a relatively short window.

Mayor: Right.

Louis: People shouldn't be there so long that, you know, we built a high school there for all of the juveniles. and in that you can register voters because it is a semi-permanent address at this point.

Mayor: Well again that's why we are not using it as the address. It's where you come from is your address. And look whether you are there for days or you are there for months, we still want to respect each person as an individual, as a human being. They need to be involved in their society positively and productively. We want them registered to vote. We want them voting. We want them to never see the inside of a jail cell again and I actually think those ideas go together.

Louis: And I mean not to trouble your sleep tonight but as you know registration records are public so people, reporters can find out who gets registered, compare it to other data bases and what will follow will be stories about somebody who did or accused of doing something fairly horrendous who now has the right to vote. You're okay with that?

Mayor: The law is the law. Right now the law in this state says as best I understand it, if you are a convicted of a felony and you are serving time for a felony, or you are on parole for felony, you cannot vote in that time. Once you have paid your debt to society you can vote. If you convicted of a lesser crime you can vote. If you are just accused of a crime but you have not been convicted, you can vote. We need maximum participation. We need to honor the constitutional assumption of innocent until proven guilty. We also have to honor the notion of that when someone has paid their debt to society, their situation should be normalized. I mean this is a fight all over this country, to a big fight coming up in Florida. I know you know a lot of about Florida, you know to make sure that folks who did serve their time now are given back their democratic right. You know someone might have done something really unfortunate and inappropriate but if they went through a process and served their time, they are still a part of our community, they deserve the right to vote.

Louis: Okay, very good we'll see how that all works out. We are going to take a quick break, I've got more to talk about with Mayor de Blasio.

[...]

Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. I'm joined once again by Mayor Bill de Blasio. And Mr. Mayor, the Council is moving to a vote on capping the number of Uber, Lyft, and other app hail vehicles. We just had a report suggesting that people are already positioning themselves to turn this cap into effectively another medallion system where people are buying up lots of permissions, leasing, renting, will probably increase the price on those things. Are we replacing one problem with a new one?

Mayor: Look it's always good to ask the question are there unintended consequences. I don't see that in this case but I want to start by saying procedurally what this law would do is it's a one year cap and in that time there is time to study the overall situation and the Taxi and Limousine Commission would decide from there what to do. But here's what I think we've seen – we've seen a race to the bottom in terms of wages and in terms of the livelihoods of these drivers, not just in the for hire vehicle sector but in the yellow cab sector as well. So the Uber business model is flood the market with as many cars and drivers as possible, gain more market share, and to hell with what happens to those drivers or anybody else involved. And in the end what that has created is the kind of race to the bottom that has literally driven down wages below minimum wage level for a lot of Uber drivers and even for other drivers. There was a study that came out from the University of California, went into real detail about the huge seismic impact of this. If you correct the situation by saying okay there's a cap now, what I think will logically happen is the available number of vehicles and drivers distributed out to where the need is better, we get to see those drivers do better. We like to see everyone served but not such an oversaturation that no one can actually make a living and so I think when you add up all the for hire vehicles, huge new number compared to a few years ago – the existing yellow cabs, you know green cabs, all the liveries, car services in the outer boroughs, that's a lot of different options for people but it's not continuing to be this continued explosive growth that just forces down everyone's wages.

Louis: As you know there are, including some civil rights leaders, people sort of arguing the consumer side saying that you know we have had transportation deserts in effect created by first the yellow cab drivers and now there's some signs that it's not entirely solved, even as there are all of these new for hire vehicles pouring into the market, are there, are you comfortable that those voices are being heard?

Mayor: Those voices are very important to me and they are certainly are very important to the Taxi and Limousine Commission. Again as we study over the next year we are going to have account for that. Look I think transportation deserts are a bigger concern for the city and we have tried to address it structurally in a lot of ways, select bus service being added, 21 new routes coming, ferry service now reaching a lot of new areas of the city, the Rockaways, obviously Soundview coming soon in the Bronx for an example. You know, more and more bike sharing, there's a lot of different things going on in transportation but I would note that when you have an over saturated dynamic, that is not helping a lot of people in need, that's driving down the wages of the people who do the driving, it's not necessarily helping the people in the transportation deserts, especially if a lot of that attention is being forced on Midtown Manhattan. We need to think systematically about how to make sure that people in every neighborhood get the transportation they need in a way they can afford without any discrimination, that's what we are going to study. But what I do know if purposeful oversaturation of the market doesn't ultimately help anyone. It only creates desperation among drivers.

Louis: Okay, we will see how all of this works out and I guess final question on this, are you concerned about possibly getting sort of bigfooted in Albany meaning Uber and Lyft and others who want to maybe change things around, they suggested a \$100 million fund, that was just kind of swept aside and not considered seriously for drivers, I would imagine their next step might be to go and invoke aggressive use of the Vehicle and Traffic Law out of Albany and maybe take the issue away from the City.

Mayor: I wouldn't be shocked if that was attempted, I don't think it would work. First of all, on the offer of a fund, I mean, if they want to go ahead and do a fund, God bless them, and that would be a nice version of respect for, you know, all the people whose wages they have driven down but it would not solve the problem. And I think you cannot say, hey we'll create a fund while continuing to deepen a fundamental injustice and a structural problem. That doesn't make any sense to me.

Going to Albany, they could try. But I think what's happened here is people have woken up to this race to the bottom with wages, they've woken up to the fact that these are major, you know, giant corporations, multi-national corporations with their own agenda. Certainly everyone has been painfully moved by the suicides of the drivers and it speaks volumes to what's going on out there. Everyone is experience more congestion than ever.

I think there's a lot of reasons why the leaders in Albany are not going to see things any differently than leaders here. I also think that we're going to have Democratic State Senate that's going to hear the voices of people all over the City that say that we do not want to see a dumbing down of wages and benefits for working people in this City and they're going to be sensitive to that.

Louis: Okay, my suggestion by the way, all electric cars. Right?

Mayor: Ahead of the curve there.

Louis: And make it all green. Let's talk about the about the Inwood rezoning that's also up – unprecedented amounts of conflict, controversy, the passion around this. Your Office is at the center of this. My understanding is how rezonings happen is that you first go to a member of the Council and say, look are you interested in this, and if they're not interested you kind of move on. What happened here? Because despite what the Councilman has said, he's kind of going back and forth on it, he's the man in the middle. We're going to hear from him at another time.

Mayor: Sure.

Louis: But it seems like the community is really up in arms about this.

Mayor: I would caution. When you say unprecedented, that's not my impression. I've been Mayor for four and a half years, but before that as Public Advocates Councilmember, I've seen a lot of rezonings, I think a lot of them have generated real passion on all sides. This one, you're exactly right, the only way we proceed is, and here's the basic message to any community and Councilmember, we're ready to make the kind of investment in a community that only happens basically once in a generation. In this case it's hundreds of millions of dollars.

We're ready to create a lot more affordable housing, both new affordable housing and preserving existing affordable housing. That means people who are facing those displacement pressures actually get guaranteed continuity, they're going to stay in the community, they're going to be subsidized, they're going to get to stay there. That's a very big deal. In this case, you know money for education, money for parks, all sorts of things the community has wanted. If a Councilmember at the beginning says I'm sorry that doesn't interest or I can't accept that,

exactly what you said, I've said it publically, we will take our resources and our focus and go to another community that wants it. And most do.

You're right, the Councilman who I think is a very good representative, someone I share a lot of values with, he's engaged us throughout, he demanded a lot for his community, he got a lot for his community. Obviously the final vote is coming up but I think in the end a whole lot of people in Inwood look at the package and say, this is the kind of thing we've been asking for decades.

We saw that in East New York, we saw that in Far Rockaway, we saw that in East Harlem, not necessarily every single activist agreed, but a whole lot of everyday people who have been clamoring for more investment in parks, and schools, and jobs, and more affordable housing, they said, you know, that's what we've been asking for, we're glad it's finally happening. They want to make sure it was guaranteed, bluntly it was not in the previous administrations, in this administration these are legally binding agreements.

Louis: On the question of development, the notion of new jail in Lower Manhattan. Everything I have ever heard for years about closing down Rikers Island talked about the need to expand, rebuild the Queens House of Detention, expand the Brooklyn House of Detention, get the Bronx Barge replaced with something on land, but everybody I've ever talk to said, look the Tombs, it's too dense, it's already in a sort of tightly congested area, you got to be happy with the 900 beds you have. You want to try something different?

Mayor: Look, we have a situation here where we are creating four new facilities. The one in the Bronx will be on the Police tow pound up there. The barge will continue - I've said this to everyone - will continue till the end of the process, then we won't need the barge when we know we can get off Rikers, we'll no longer need the barge as well. But for Manhattan the initial assumption was that we would have to take the site that we currently have in Manhattan and build higher. There was a second alternative that was found just a few blocks away, that is being looked at as well, they're both on publically owned land.

We're going to ultimately - the most important voice will be the Councilmember, Margaret Chin, who's been a really important part of this process, who's very much in favor of getting off Rikers and ready to work with us to get it done. So we've got two sites that we need to choose between but both could work, but in the end you're going to have four sites around the City with roughly equal sized facilities and that will be enough to get us off Rikers once and for all.

Louis: There's this proposal that the New York Times is floating for a beach in Manhattan, yes, no?

Mayor: So actually I think it's an interesting idea. The initial response from my administration was one that was fair in saying, hey this will not be easy, it comes with lots of problems, I think that was a fair insider response but as a New Yorker I am kind of intrigued. So we're going to look at it, it's true some other cities have found ways to do it. Now let's look outside of Manhattan, lets - I'm a Brooklynite, you're a Brooklynite, we have great beaches in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, we have Orchard Beach in the Bronx, there's a lot of great beaches, but for Manhattan if we could find a way, it would be really intriguing. It would take a ton of work. Here's my message to all New Yorkers, until we open a beach formally, do not swim where you're not supposed to swim.

Louis: My dad used to swim in the Hudson River man. You could smell him from a block away, it was wild.

Mayor: I want you to do a public service announcement okay.

Louis: Thanks a lot. Good to see you. We'll see you next week.

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