

# Bill de Blasio

## TACKLING INEQUALITY



**M**ore than a year into office as Mayor of New York City, **Bill de Blasio** has led the fight on many issues important to the more than eight million people who live in America’s largest city. He was elected to office on promises to tackle issues ranging from social inequality to climate change. Here, Mayor de Blasio discusses the progress of some of his game-changing plans for New Yorkers.

● **In your inaugural speech, you pledged to reduce economic and social inequalities. How do you plan to do this?**

Tackling the inequality crisis means getting to the heart of the single greatest burden for millions of New Yorkers: housing. In a city where half of New Yorkers are rent-burdened and families are being priced out of their own neighbourhoods, we need to intervene on a bigger scale than ever before.

“Housing New York” – our plan to build and preserve enough affordable housing for a half-million New Yorkers in the coming decade – is the blueprint for how we’ll get this done. We’re creating new tools

and reforming existing ones to make sure that neighbourhoods across the boroughs can increase the amount of affordable housing New Yorkers need, while protecting the affordability of existing housing.

“Housing New York” is just one piece of a broad approach to combatting inequality. We’re also implementing free, full-day pre-kindergarten for every child, implementing paid sick leave worker protection, raising and expanding our living wage, and creating new career pathways so more New Yorkers can acquire the skills they need to secure quality jobs in a growing 21st century economy.



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● **Tell us more about the “Pre-K for All” initiative, and the US\$150-million plan to improve over 90 public schools.**

Full-day pre-K, or pre-kindergarten, is the cornerstone of our administration’s plan to transform public education in New York City. This is combined with the doubling of after-school enrichment for middle schools and the creation of new community schools. NYC has also reached a new labour agreement with its teachers that will improve the standard of educators. This contract, the first in years, enables greater professional development, innovative school models, and tougher procedures to remove those unfit for the profession.

High-quality pre-K represents change at a scale that will raise achievement and reduce inequality across all communities.

Today, more than 75 per cent of the cohort of 70,000 children is enrolled in free, high-quality, full-day pre-K. Next year, we will serve every child. Early childhood interventions like these make sure that all New York children are on the fast track to success, starting from the youngest ages, where disparities begin.

We’re confronting those disparities in later grades as well. Our “School Renewal Program” will fundamentally change the direction of and accelerate progress in 94 struggling schools. This is in stark contrast to the old approach of simply closing, or phasing schools out. Each “Renewal School” will transform into a “Community School”, knitting together new services that support children’s families, as well as their mental health and physical wellbeing. Each Renewal School will provide an extra hour of extended instruction per day, and could offer additional after-school, weekend and summer learning opportunities, as needed. Each school will also receive additional resources for academic intervention and professional development to create a better learning environment for students.



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● This June, New York will host the World Cities Summit Mayors Forum 2015, with the theme “Innovative Cities of Opportunity”. In your view, what are some innovative solutions to addressing inequality that cities can explore?

As mayors, we have diverse solutions at our fingertips. If we work together to leverage the power of municipal governments, we can advance local strategies and build a global urban agenda together. We can catalyse real change for the people that we serve.

This year, we launched the most ambitious, dynamic and useful municipal ID card programme in the United States, empowering all New Yorkers regardless of their immigration status. IDNYC is not only a card for all New Yorkers, it is the gateway to the city’s services. It is the key to opening a bank account, or getting a library card, and the ticket to many of our city’s finest cultural institutions. More than that, this card represents who we are: New Yorkers who value equality, opportunity and diversity.

We must also remember that access to affordable transportation is central to fighting inequality and making our cities more resilient. For years, the conventional wisdom has been that certain neighbourhoods are doomed to isolation because of their geography. That’s a phenomenon that’s been true in New York and cities across the globe. Even people who can see Manhattan’s skyline from their home face more than an hour of commuting. We’re going to change that.

01 The lack of affordable housing is one of the most pressing issues in New York.  
02 From left to right: NYC School Chancellor Carmen Fariña, First Lady Chirlane McCray, Mayor Bill de Blasio and Queens Borough President Melinda Katz visit Home Sweet Home Children’s School in Queens during the first-day-of-school five-borough tour.  
03 Mayor de Blasio launches the IDNYC municipal identification programme on 12 January 2015.

This year, we announced that we're launching a new citywide ferry service to be open for business in 2017. New ferry rides will be priced the same as subway fares, so ferries will be as affordable to New Yorkers as our subways and buses. Residents in long-isolated communities like the Rockaways, Red Hook and Soundview will be closer to the opportunities they need. And beyond connecting residents to jobs in the central business district, our new citywide ferry system will spur the development of new commercial corridors throughout the outer boroughs.

We will also expand the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) serving 400,000 New Yorkers by completing a network of 20 routes over the next four years. BRT will cut transit time on existing routes by 15 to 25 per cent. This means New Yorkers will spend less time in transit and more time living their lives.

● **To what extent do economic and social inequalities affect urban resilience? How would narrowing the rich-poor divide make a city more resilient?**

Since the great recession, New York City has, in many ways, bounced back. We've grown to 8.4 million people with a record 3.5 million private sector jobs and more Fortune 500 companies than anywhere else in the world. But progress has been uneven. While the number of jobs is up, many of these jobs are in lower-paying sectors with fewer opportunities for wage growth and career advancement. Restoring upward mobility to people at every rung of the economic ladder is critical to making cities resilient for the long-term.

We live in a world where cities and regions compete for talent, investment and jobs, and where economic turbulence and crises caused by climate change are becoming more and more common. Forward-thinking cities need to invest in their people to prepare for those uncertainties. A better-educated and trained workforce helps a city compete for good jobs in the global economy. Families with paid sick leave and access to early education for their children are better positioned to handle the ups and downs of life without losing a job or falling into hardship. Cities that can reduce the skyrocketing cost of housing can maintain the kind of economic diversity needed to attract employers and make for sustainable communities.





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● This issue of **URBAN SOLUTIONS** has a special focus on resilience. What does resilience mean to you in the urban context? How would you define a resilient city?

Resilient cities don't just weather proverbial storms but are prepared for them and put measures in place to minimise their impact and protect their people. They invest in the economic stability and the upward mobility of families. They invest in 21st century infrastructure, and they prioritise education as the foundation of long-term success.

● What role can the individual and the community play in disaster preparedness, response and recovery?

In 2012, 44 New Yorkers lost their lives and tens of thousands were displaced by Hurricane Sandy. In the face of incredible hardship, New Yorkers, especially our first responders, showed extraordinary courage, generosity and determination. We saw ordinary New Yorkers providing assistance, care, and temporary housing for their neighbours in distress. Community-based organisations played a critical role in the city's first-line of communication with New Yorkers in all five boroughs, and they've since been integrated more deeply into our broader emergency response plans to harness the goodwill of New Yorkers in every neighbourhood.

One thing we learnt during Sandy is that there is no substitute for person-to-person contact in crises. From evacuation to emergency provisioning, to delivering medical aid, bringing help to New Yorkers' doorsteps is the most effective way to reach people – not waiting for them to come to the government.

<sup>01</sup> This past February, Mayor de Blasio announced a new, affordable citywide ferry service which will launch its first phase by 2017.

<sup>02</sup> Select Bus Service, NYC's version of a Bus Rapid Transit system, will be expanded over the next four years.

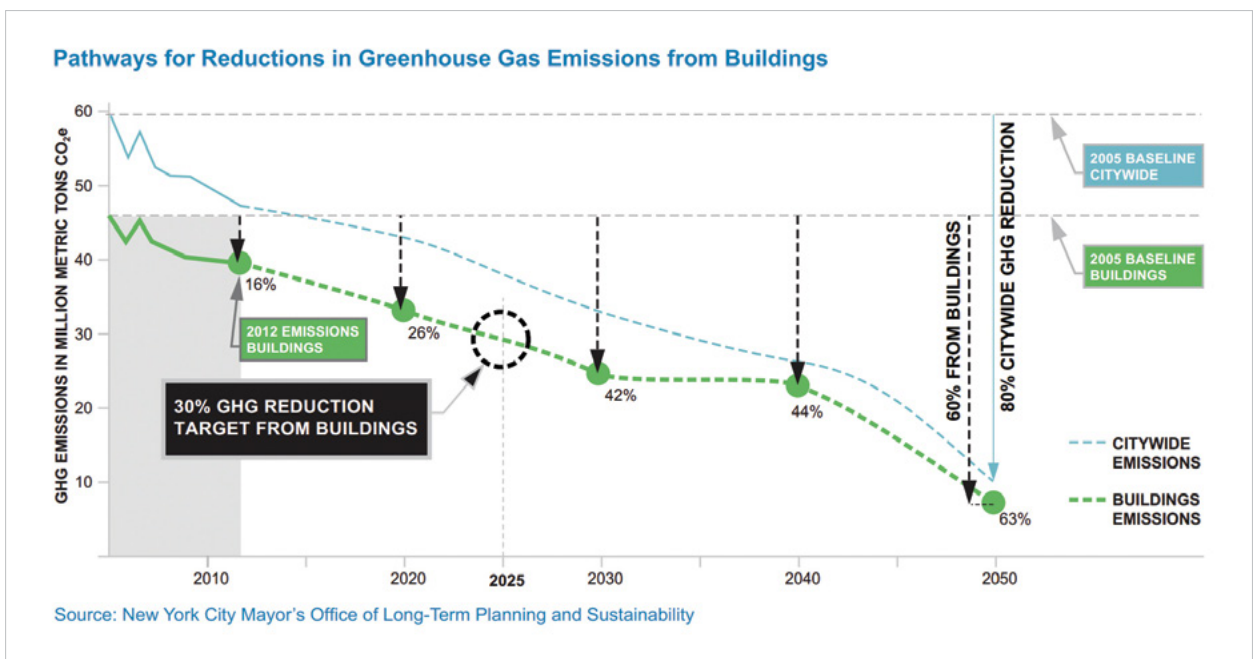
● **A resilient city invests in preparing for future extreme weather events, in addition to its post-disaster recovery. What are the main challenges balancing these two priorities, and how do you overcome them?**

The need to rebuild and the need to invest in resiliency aren't at odds. They go hand-in-hand. We're building back post-Sandy in a way that will better protect us from future disasters. We've kickstarted Sandy recovery and are now delivering relief to residents and businesses around the city. But we're making sure that the work facilitates raising foundations, fortifying homes and protecting vital infrastructure from future storms. This is all part of a massive, comprehensive, and multi-layered resiliency plan being implemented around the city.

Today, we're working to build back the most affected communities and to strengthen them for whatever may come our way. That includes strengthening coastal defences, upgrading buildings, protecting infrastructure and critical services, and making homes, businesses and neighbourhoods safer and more vibrant.

We're also confronting climate change at its source, becoming the largest city in the world to commit to reducing our carbon emissions by 80 per cent by the year 2050. Doing this isn't just smart environmental policy, or even an existential imperative to protect New Yorkers – taking on climate change is good economics too.

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● **URBAN SOLUTIONS** is read by over 30,000 city leaders and allied professionals. What is one message that you would like to convey to our readers?

Cities are wrestling the challenges of our time: rising inequality, climate change, the need for more affordable housing, among many others. We can lead, we can innovate. We cannot wait.

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01 The roadmap for reducing greenhouse gas emission will create an estimated 3,500 construction-related jobs, and generate US\$8.5 billion in total cost savings for New Yorkers over the next 10 years.

02 Mayor de Blasio tours the Staten Island University Hospital (SIUH) power plant and boiler room, which will benefit from the US\$28-million resiliency investment in preparation for any future weather events. SIUH is home to the largest emergency room on Staten Island with about half a million residents.

03 The reconstructed Coney Island Boardwalk at Brighton Beach uses recycled plastic lumber which lasts longer, and fares better in hurricanes. It will include a 10-foot-wide concrete carriage lane to better accommodate emergency response services.