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ERIC JOHNSON *03: There's just no playbook for what we're dealing with. This is like starting a race that someone tells you, you know, on your mark, get set, go, and doesn't tell you how far you got to run and when the race is going to end. You don't really know what is the exact right time to reopen your economy and how to handle this. So we're trying to do this as intelligently and safely as we can here in Dallas.

MARGARET KOVAL *83: Hello, and welcome to "We Roar." With coronavirus continuing to dominate our lives, we're getting in touch with students, faculty, staff and alumni all around the country to hear how Princetonians are living and working through the crisis, to hear how we're staying together from a distance and how so many of us are working to serve the wider world. In this episode, we hear from a Woodrow Wilson School graduate alumnus from 2003 who now leads one of America's largest cities.

ERIC JOHNSON *03: My name is Eric Johnson, and I'm the mayor of the city of Dallas, Texas. Making sound public policy is difficult even when you have the information that you need. It's made immeasurably more difficult when you don't.

It's very hard to make policy and to plan and to do the things you need to do when you're missing key pieces of information or when the information is not coming in as quickly as you need to be able to act. I just tried to make sure that I didn't make any decisions that I'd look back on months, years, decades later and regret that I was too slow to act. And so we were one of the first jurisdictions in the country to go to stay-at-home. And I think that that's helped us flatten our curve here.

But you know, the biggest disappointment in this entire response as a country, at every level of government, all included, to this has been just the lack of a really truly robust nationally led and locally implemented testing regime. And so without that, all of us at the local level were left not only to try to make good decisions without knowing really how the virus was moving through our communities, but to also try to solve that problem too.

Testing is, it's just critical to understanding where the virus is at any moment in time and how it's spreading and where. And we're just not getting the testing done that we need to get done to be able to, I think, progress too much more quickly in reopening our economy here locally, which is really what needs to happen. We absolutely have to, at some point, get people working again and getting people out of their homes at some point. But to do that safely and to do that responsibly, you need that testing data.

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So the question is, how have I been dealing with the public health — I'm going to call it science — as it relates to mask-wearing versus people's feelings about their individual rights and in some cases really resisting those types of emergency orders? I think what I've tried to do is show a certain amount of understanding, because I do understand this

is Texas. I'm a native Texan. I was born and raised in Dallas.

I get this place. I really do. We do have this sort of individualist ethos here. We resist, to a certain degree, being told what to do. There's a rugged individualism that sort of runs through this place.

And I get it. But I also get why we had the Texas Disaster Act of 1975 and why it says that under these very limited circumstances, there has to be some time when the governor or a county executive or a mayor can step in and say, for the good of us all, certain things just have to happen.

And so what I've been trying to do is to be a calming voice and to be a voice of empathy and understanding and balance and not be strident and not be insensitive to people's feelings, but to also tell them the truth and to try to be fact-based in everything I say and data-driven in everything I do, and to tell folks what maybe some other folks who are being more political, who may be thinking about a campaign — I'm not. Not only am I not in a partisan office — the mayor of Dallas is elected on a non-partisan basis — I'm not even up for re-election, so you know, I'm not thinking politically at all. I'm really thinking about my people's well-being.

And so I've been trying to tell folks, look, you really need to understand that mask-wearing works. It helps.

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You know, the reality is we're looking at, in Dallas, at a \$25 million budgetary shortfall from sales taxes alone in this current fiscal year, maybe \$34, \$35 million or so total shortfall this year, and up to maybe \$140 million on the high end next year. And those are big numbers for a municipality. I mean, that really will impact our ability to do the things that people in Dallas have come to expect their city government to do.

And that makes me very, that makes me sad. It's just important for me in my role as the mayor to advocate on behalf of the city in Washington, D.C. and in Austin, to make sure they understand that there's real pain being felt here at the local level of a financial sort, and there's real help that we need that they can give us. And the primary way they can help us is not just giving us more money. We do need more money. But we really need flexibility in how we can use that money.

Currently, a lot of our money is being — there's a lot of strings attached to it, in terms of us only being able to use it in certain very, very narrow, specific, COVID-related ways. When we shut down our economy, essentially, here in Dallas, it caused a budgetary shortfall across the board of \$25 million or so that we've estimated. We need to be able to use money we get to just simply plug holes in the budget.

We need the flexibility to just replace lost revenue, to be able to operate our libraries. That's not directly COVID-related, so to speak. But we also have to recognize that

COVID has caused some real economic pain here and that we could use some help from the federal government in being able to fix those things in our budget.

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We're not sure when we're going to get a vaccine. We're not sure what the implications are for even being able to develop a vaccine, based on what we know so far. All of those facts create a certain amount of uncertainty around the health aspect of this that's going to make going back to normal very difficult.

I mean, to a certain degree, President Trump, I think, is learning this lesson slowly but surely, that you can't fiat the American people's confidence in going back out into the world and returning to normal. You can fiat dates on a calendar that you're going to allow things to happen, but you can't fiat people's confidence and their feeling of security and safety.

So tomorrow, the governor of Texas can announce that the whole economy is wide open. I hope he doesn't, but he could. Does that mean that I think people are going to go pouring back into it? I don't think they will.

Based on what we're seeing so far, people are being very careful because they understand, I think, this much based on what they're hearing every day about the different demographics that are succumbing to this disease around the country and what they're seeing here locally, is that you don't know how this virus is going to impact you if you get it. You'd like to believe, based on whatever age range you're in, that you have some idea, but you really don't. We've seen people as young as in their 20s, who had no underlying health conditions to speak of, die from this in our community.

And so as long as that's a reality, I don't see people rushing back into the economy until they have reason to believe that they can do so safely. A large percentage of our population in Dallas is employed by these small business enterprises, and we don't want them to go out of business. So we're trying to give them a lifeline.

We wish there was more money. We wish we could help more people. But the money just unfortunately is not infinite here at the city. So that's what we're doing to help.

And we've also adopted a policy that creates a step before a tenant can be evicted from an apartment that hopefully buys the tenant and the landlord time to work out a repayment plan so that no one's being evicted at this time. And I'd say, really, the whole city, I think, deserves to be commended for what I would say is overwhelming compliance and willingness to sacrifice the individual for the good of the greater community.

I don't want to take a victory lap yet, and I don't want to get ahead of ourselves here. But it really does appear — and I think the data supports this at this point — that Dallas has done a pretty good job. I think that I'm generally an optimistic person. I've had to

give this some thought over the past few weeks of dealing with this, because it's been very trying.

And I realize that my attitude and my perspective on things is very much a positive, can-do attitude. And I think what makes me hopeful is we've been, up to now, relatively speaking, successful with what we've been trying to do. And I think that Dallas is the kind of town that's going to bounce back from this as quickly as anybody in the country. And I'm hopeful that we'll be able to soon start, in a safe way, bringing more businesses back online and reengaging in our economy. So I think we're going to be OK. I'm confident we're going to be OK.

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