

# InfrastructureUSA

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**Interview by Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

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**Patrick J. Natale on:**

## **Poor grades for infrastructure**

The problem is we talk about it but haven't done anything about it, and there've been many examples. We had the highway bill that was passed a couple years ago that took well over a year to get passed and it was under-funded. So we went backwards, and going backwards is noted in our grades. Our roads are D minus and bridges are...bridges are near the top—they're a C—which is not something to rally around. So we've gone the wrong way, and people have gotten conditioned to sit in traffic. They say "Well, that's the way it is." Well, it doesn't have to be that way if you invest properly and make a difference.

## **Lack of ongoing public concern about infrastructure**

Most of the time infrastructure is hidden. Everybody expects you go to the tap, you throw the faucet on, and you want good, clean water to come out. You go to the wall, you throw on the lights and you expect the lights to come on, and all that stuff is done magically. It's underground, out of sight, out of mind. You only complain about it when you throw the switch and nothing happens: a blackout or a major water leak and on and on. Then everybody reacts, but they soon forget...It's an investment in our future. When we improve infrastructure, we provide an economic stimulus to society, jobs, and movement of goods. So the biggest problem is that it goes away—they forget. If you don't live in New Orleans, most of the public doesn't care about what happened there anymore. That's an exaggeration to a point, but pretty much. If you don't live in Minneapolis, you don't think about the bridge as much. Out of sight, out of mind, and that's the unfortunate part. I think it goes back to leadership, and another key point is there needs to be a really good plan to get out of a problem. Everybody wants a quick fix. Let's do a quick fix. Example: stimulus package. Good concept, quick fix. My concern is most people say, "We gave money for that. We don't have to do anything else for infrastructure anymore." All that was, was a down payment on what's really needed. So leadership and planning are two key things that we need to correct. People just forget.

## **Infrastructure and leadership**

If we are not investing in the future, we're going to see a constant decline. One of the problems we have in our society is that we have a "patch and pray" mentality. We say "Oh, let's throw a little bit of money at it," and hope that it

continues to serve us. Some of these facilities are fifty years old and better. Now look at the road system: the interstate system is a magnificent creation by Eisenhower, and the thing is, this is not party-sensitive. Eisenhower was a Republican, took a positive position. Reagan took a positive position. Now it appears that Obama is taking a positive position, so to me it doesn't matter what your stripes are. It's a matter, again, of leadership. But we need to make sure we're aware of putting investments in maintaining the quality. We can't just put a road out there and expect it to last for fifty years without proper maintenance, or any of the other facilities. Now we used these things all along. You talk about bridges that are public safety [issues], you talk about dams. The amount of dams that are at risk around the country that have public safety issues, that's why the engineers get involved. Engineers have a requirement to hold paramount the public safety and welfare. That is our charge by the licensing boards in this country. That's whom we work for, so we have an obligation to make the situation correct, by talking about and coming up with good solutions.

### **Paying for infrastructure improvements**

We have to come up with new investments, but it can be done. We propose a 25-cent increase in the gas tax to make it happen or, say, the user fee. The bottom line is the truckers are behind this. They believe because they drive on the roads and the bridges, they know the need for investing in it because it impacts them. Delays on the road are costly to them. Repairs are costly to them, so these are factors and if you look at it, the first reaction is, "25 cents, oh my god that'll destroy the economy!" Well, if you look at it per person, it's about 150 dollars per person. Is that worth that kind of investment to have improved road conditions? I believe it is. I remember we proposed a 5-cent increase 10 years ago and we were told that definitely would destroy the economy. I remember when gas went up to three or four dollars and it wasn't the best thing, but it wasn't the straw that broke the camel's back on the economy.

### **Need for government advocacy**

I think including infrastructure in the stimulus package was a major sign. The prior stimulus package that went out, I was disappointed that infrastructure was not a part of it, and the reason that you look at it besides the impact on the facilities, is it's a jobs bill. Every billion dollars you spend on infrastructure you create about 30 thousand domestic jobs. That's an important issue when you're talking about impacting the economic conditions in the country, so I think there's a positive point there. We also have some really good leaders in the Congress that get it, understand it, and are out actively promoting it. People like Oberstar and people like Mica from Florida and Blumenauer from Portland, Oregon. There're folks like that that understand the problem, they understand the issues...now we need to get more advocates. A challenge we have right now is the surface transportation bill expired several months ago. This is the highway bill, the funding for highway projects. It has not been reauthorized. We have no

clue when it will...there's been an extension on the old bill, but projects are not going forward because firms and companies are not bringing people on or maintaining people when they don't have a lasting funding mechanism for short term funding, so it's a major issue.

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