

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Adolfo Carrión, Jr., Director, White House Office of Urban Affairs & Deputy Assistant to the President

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA
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Adolfo Carrión:

Support for InfrastructureUSA.org's mission

Anything that will stir up the conversation among the citizenry about the future of our country, both in its physical manifestation and in its social and economic manifestation, is a good thing, and I think what InfrastructureUSA.org is doing is laudable and should be applauded. We need more of this kind of civic engagement.

Population growth and the need for significant infra investment

We have grown exponentially as a country over the last hundred and fifty, two hundred years, in ways that people did not expect, and even now we expect to add another 120 million people over the next 40 years to the US population. That's going to require, just in space alone, without speaking about the quality and the shelf life of the existing space and the new space, another 200 billion square feet of homes and office buildings and institutions and community facilities, let alone the pipes and the wires and the roads to sustain that. We already have an aging infrastructure, and we know that the strength of our economy is in our ability to move people and goods in an efficient way, and it's getting to a critical point where it is becoming increasingly inefficient to move products and people and conduct our way of life. It is central to who we are as a democracy and as a free market, as a free open society, to allow the free movement of people and the choice to go where you want to go. So we have to make a significant investment. In the stimulus package, a third of the stimulus went to infrastructure. A third went to, essentially, rescuing states and cities because of a loss of revenue. A third went to tax cuts for 95% of Americans, but that one third is huge. In addition to that, a commitment to a high-speed rail network to be able to move between cities. Right now, there are 55 million people between Boston and Washington. Unfortunately, many of them get in airplanes and fly, rather than move around that region efficiently in a clean, cost-effective way on rail. The president is committed to a high-speed rail network that will move people around the country, and it will allow commuters to get around with ease. It will deal with some of the congestion on our roads and, of course, the environmental impact and the cost issues. In addition to that, we've sent to Congress, in this fiscal year—the new budget fiscal year 2011—a plan for a 4-billion-dollar infrastructure bank, essentially where places around the country can borrow money or collateralize their local funds and be able to build infrastructure. The cities will have to grow vertically. They will have to accommodate the growth in population. We're not going to continue to

spread these urban centers. I don't think anybody believes that that makes sense, that you're sitting two and three hours in traffic every day trying to get your kids to school, get to places to go shopping, etc. And then our systems: the safety, security and quality of our water and our waste systems and how we deal with waste. All of that is infrastructure, so we've got a lot to do. The president has created the office of urban affairs to give attention to this issue, but to do it in a cross-agency, collaborative way. Because if you invest a transportation dollar, you should take into consideration a home, an apartment house, you should take into consideration a school, a health center access to work, etc. And so, as we go forward over the next several decades, this work of urban policy development is not about tomorrow. It's about today, it's about our kids and grandkids. What kind of world are we going to leave them, and what kinds of costs are we going to transfer to them if we don't do this important investment now.

Infra education

There needs to be an awakening in our country, and a connection that begins at the earliest possible levels of education where you're connecting kids to the way the world works and the way our country works, and how things happen around them. People take for granted that somehow the subway is always there or that the bus will always stop at a certain stop or that there'll be a road and it will be safe and the traffic light will function and that when you turn on the faucet the water will turn on, you flush the toilet it somehow will be magically taken care of by something, by some force out there. People need to understand that we all collectively have this responsibility to live together in a society and we build that society and its systems and we are responsible to pay for it. So when a municipality, a mayor comes to his or her constituents or governor and says "You know, we're going to have to do this expansion of this network and we're going to have to buy more transportation," it's an outrage, as if it's somehow supposed to be taken care of magically. I think what we need to do is insert it in our education system at the earliest possible level, and it goes right to the heart of civics, our democratic way of life, civic responsibility, personal responsibility for your share of that pie and of that system. I think because there is a fundamental disconnect that starts early in life when we don't teach our children—they're not even aware of how things work, whether it's the physical, the built environment, or the civic and decision-making structure of our society, there is a disconnect, and that's why less than fifty percent of the US population is engaged in electing the President of the United States and leader of the free world. That's why in some council districts and state legislative districts around the country, 10% or less of the adult eligible population that can vote is actively voting and deciding the future. I think the reforms that we are making in our education system—encouraging options, a more competitive education environment, encouraging schools to be part of the community planning process and education systems and communities to be all part of this—will begin to turn this around.

www.InfrastructureUSA.org
212.414.9220
info@infrastructureusa.org