

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Congressman Jerrold Nadler (D-NY), Member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Jerrold Nadler:

Getting the public's attention

I think a number of things have happened. Number one: congestion gets worse, people get more frustrated and they start adding two and two together, getting four and saying "what's going on here?" Secondly, we had a bridge collapse and kill people in Minnesota with a lot of publicity. That gets people's attention. Everybody goes over bridges; whether it's the George Washington Bridge, or some little trestle somewhere, people go over bridges all the time. You read in the paper about ordinary people going to work in their cars getting killed because they didn't repair the bridge and you say "wait a minute, what about me?" So I think people are more concerned.

More funding leads to greater competitiveness

Pre-Reagan, this country was spending about three percent of GDP annually on infrastructure. Since then, it's been spending a little under 1½ percent. That is why, not only is our infrastructure falling apart, but it's why we don't have the modern infrastructure that others do. Other countries are rapidly constructing, and if you don't keep up in your infrastructure, you become less economically competitive, and our economy's going to fall behind. Infrastructure is not only roads and bridges and highways and railroads and mass transit and airports, but also broadband and smart electricity grids, and all those things. If we don't keep up, our economy's going to fall behind. We pioneered in much of this. We were ahead of the world in infrastructure for a long time, and that's one of the reasons our economy was so competitive. Our economy is getting and will get less competitive if we don't catch up on this. Secondly, in terms of jobs in a recession like now, infrastructure is very job intensive and it can be done rapidly and it's one of the best things you can do. My only regret was that, in the stimulus bill we passed last year: A, the stimulus bill was too small in terms of need to the economy; but second of all, too small a part of it was infrastructure, in terms of the immediate job production.

Increasing the gas tax

We're talking in Washington. We have a very good bill in front of the transportation committee, a revolutionary bill that collapses 108 different transportation programs – which had their reasons at one time – into six major programs. It gives states much more flexibility. It adds greatly to the amount of money we're spending, but we have to finance it. We can no longer depend simply on the gasoline tax the way it is, which declines in revenue both because it's not inflation-sensitive and because public policy is to use fewer gallons of gasoline, not more, and if your tax is 18 cents per gallon, using fewer gallons means less revenue. So we've got to either increase the gasoline tax, or find some other source of revenue, or both.

The cost of inaction

The role of people in a democracy is to push their elected representatives to do what they think is necessary to do, and our elected representatives have to hear more about the necessity for infrastructure, and more importantly, about the willingness of people to say "If we have to have a tax revenue to pay for this, we have to have tax revenue to pay for it." We have to have tax revenue. People have to say we're willing to do that. If we're not, people are going to pay in the end. They're going to pay in lives, or they're going to pay in everything that gets delivered to them. They won't notice that the extra cost, partly, is because of extra transportation cost, but they're going to pay one way or the other.

Paying the fare in New York

We've got to do what's got to be done. How many people in this city, in New York, spend how many hours frustrated in congestion? Or waiting for transit they can't get onto because they're too crowded, and that don't come very often because we've cut the number of trains because the budgets don't keep up? Or are angry that the fares are going up? The New York City subway rider pays a much, much higher percentage of the cost of the fare box than any other mass transit rider in the world, and they ought to be angry about that. They ought to say "We want some general revenue to pay a large percentage of the cost, and the cost of new infrastructure." It shouldn't all come out of the fare box.