

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Polly Trottenberg, Assistant Secretary for Transportation Policy, U.S. Department of Transportation

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Polly Trottenberg:

Infra progress

I think, obviously, the economic recovery bill, that's progress. USDOT alone, we got 48 billion dollars. A big chunk of it went out through the regular formulas: highways, transit, aviation, but we also had a few really groundbreaking programs: 8 billion for high-speed rail, the largest amount of money the United States has ever invested for high-speed passenger rail; 1.5 billion for the TIGER discretionary grant program, a multi-modal performance-based grant program, really the first of its kind in the US. I think the DOT was pretty proud of the fact that we got the money out of the door pretty quickly and we've spent it on a lot of good projects, and we've had two really fantastic competitive processes where we're going to be doing some really new and innovative things.

Infra can change our way of life

What are the outcomes we're trying to achieve for our country? What are the things that investing in infrastructure, in particular transportation, can do for our economy, for our citizens, for our quality of life? I think there is a tremendous feeling that infrastructure can have a tremendous impact on all those things: on creating jobs and economic opportunity, for making livable communities, for giving all kinds of people mobility, for reducing carbon, for reducing energy dependence. Obviously, we think there are tremendous, fantastic benefits that will come out of infrastructure investment.

Harnessing public engagement

I would particularly say one of the weaknesses, particularly in transportation and particularly at the federal level, is it's a program that in a lot of ways appears to be very much a black box. People don't really know what they pay in gas taxes, they don't really know what they get for their money, and I think one of the things we need to do a much better job in is engaging the public, sort of pulling back the curtain, letting them see what they're getting, and I think the fact that we haven't done a good job of that is part of the reason why we're losing political support and why we're having such a hard time reauthorizing the bill, getting support to come up with more money. I'm very excited about having more public engagement. In our travels around the country we're seeing that on some of the

things at least that our administration is interested in – livability, different modes of transportation like bikes and pedestrian, high-speed rail—there’s incredible public excitement and engagement, and we really think we need to harness that.

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