

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Janice Tuchman:

Much work to be done

It's a big, big world out there, and of course with all the things we like to do, we like to go places in planes, we like to drive cars, we like to have clean water coming out of our taps, we like to have toilets that flush, and all of those things require infrastructure. It's interesting to note that out of the whole stimulus program that the federal government put through, out of the billions of dollars in the whole program, there was about 135 billion dollars for infrastructure, that's just a tiny drop in the bucket. A lot of what got done was patching potholes and bringing schools up to code and some road projects and stuff that really needed to get done, but not the big problems, There's tons of deferred maintenance: bridges, wastewater treatment plants, utility lines, power lines. Think of all the people that are out of power because ever storm that goes by, the power lines get knocked down. Blackouts because it's a super-hot summer and they can't keep the power chugging along and one part shuts down and it sends a ripple wave through and takes down a whole community. Where to start?

The funding challenge

The question is "where's the money? How do we get the funding to finance these things?" and one of the problems, for example, just take transportation infrastructure: highways and bridges. That has traditionally been financed by a gas tax. Nobody's interested in raising gas taxes, and even if you did, gas taxes are a diminishing return because right now the economy, in the kind of situation that it is, people are driving less. And, the good news: cars are getting more efficient, they're using less gas. So the highway trust fund, which has been the traditional source of funding for that particular type of infrastructure maintenance and improvement is going down, down, down. So, yes, we need the funding, but of course it's a great opportunity. It's an opportunity to put people to work, to have thriving businesses, and for the nation to get something for it.

Getting involved in infra change

I was actually part of the American Society of Civil Engineers fly-in to Capitol Hill, where they brought in about 200 engineers from 50 states to go visit their Congresspeople and to talk to them about how important infrastructure is to the nation. They didn't protest on the mall, but they did fly in and try to raise the profile of the issue, and other construction organizations are equally as

passionate about it: the Associated General Contractors, ARTBA, Associated Road and Transportation Builders Association, so there are some strong infrastructure advocates out there as far as construction organizations.

How do you get from people acknowledging that it's important to getting them to actually vote for a solution that will provide financing to correct the problems? At that fly-in on Capitol Hill, we heard from Congressman Mica, Congressman DeFazio, and they had some interesting ideas about alternative means of financing infrastructure, and I think that's really the key, is for some of those ideas to take root. One of them is a vehicle miles-traveled charge. There was an idea of taxing barrels of oil, because if you went not from at the pump—in other words, you're not paying at the pump, but going back a few steps, paying a few cents per barrel of oil that's processed or something like that so that it becomes more of a—it takes it a little bit farther away from the individual's pocketbook, and this feeling that we don't want any kind of tax that's going to affect the common person who is having so many difficulties right now just staying afloat.

Finding a way to fix our infra

Two things: one is what's the alternative? Do nothing and watch the bridges of the United States crumble? Watch the water systems erode? What's the alternative? We have to figure out an alternative, if there is one. The second observation is that it's not all about big. There are many things that are being done, that can be done in a small way. There are people working on urban agriculture, there are people working on small sustainability projects, and all of the small things get knitted together, they become a network, and so I think there is a lot of grassroots activity going on.

Infra work for construction companies

Certainly the infrastructure and all public sector work has taken a greater share of all the big firms' attention—because that's where the work is right now. The private sector is considerably diminished. It's infrastructure, it's also military construction, which you could think of as infrastructure, of course, in the broad sense. It's important to everybody's business for sure, but I don't think it's been important. I don't see it as a huge change recently, like since the recession or something. The other, of course, major sector that's not in the tank but not as strong—you know, infrastructure is probably at a higher level right now than industrial work, which has been so important to many of these big companies, but it's still there too. There's still work going on.

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