

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Matt Dellinger, Author, *Interstate 69: The Unfinished History of the Last Great American Highway***

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

**Matt Dellinger:**

### **The Proposed Route of I-69**

There is a piece of Interstate 69, a very short piece that was built as the original part of the Interstate system, and it goes through Michigan and Indiana. It connects Canada up at the Blue Water Bridge at Port Huron, Michigan, down through Fort Wayne and it stops at the north side of Indianapolis, Indiana. For about 20 years there has been a group of people up and down the middle of the country that has been trying to extend it all the way to Mexico through Evansville, Indiana, Memphis, Shreveport and Houston. If completed, it would go over the existing piece, Blue Water Bridge, around Detroit, down in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and around Indianapolis. The new piece would go down to Evansville, Indiana, across the Ohio River, over the parkways of Kentucky, down into Tennessee—the western edge of Tennessee. A new loop would go around Memphis, down into the Mississippi Delta, across the Mississippi River on a new bridge, over to Arkansas, through the southeast corner of Arkansas, El Dorado, into the northwest corner of Louisiana, Shreveport, and then it'll cross into Texas and go down approximately the right-of-way of US-59 and US-77, through Houston and down to Laredo and Corpus Christi and Harland.

### **How I-69 began**

So the Canada to Mexico thing: it's worth stopping here and talking about that. The original people who dreamed up this highway—and I tell the whole story in my book--it's actually a surprising story because it wasn't a blue ribbon panel in Washington, and it wasn't transportation people in the USDOT. This was really a grassroots project. A group of people in Indiana had been trying to build a road to Evansville, and they were advised by an economist who was doing a study of southern Indiana that they would have a lot better luck if they took the road through other states. The economic numbers of the feasibility study would really sing if you connected it to Memphis and to Houston, rather than just to Evansville. He pointed out that you'd also pick up other Senators and Congresspeople who would support this thing in Washington. After that was kind of pieced together, and a single guy got in his car and drove what became the route of I-69 and just cold-called chambers of commerce. I think it'll be surprising to a lot of people that a \$30 billion infrastructure project can be started by one man, but it was. One of their main selling points once they got a lobbyist in

Washington was that this was going to be the NAFTA highway because NAFTA was pretty brand new then; it was 1992 when they first got together. The idea was all the interstates in America were built east-west because at the time that's the way commerce flowed, from the oceans, from the coasts, the ports, and with NAFTA we were going to need a lot more north-south infrastructure than we thought we did in 1956. I-35 was going to not be able to withstand all the pressure of trade, and this road would connect directly the busiest crossing of Mexico and the busiest crossings of Canada. All that was true, but it wasn't as if the road solved the problem. The NAFTA motto was almost a selling point. It was something that came along after the original idea.

### **Our funding mechanism is broken**

It's undeniable. It's reaching a fever pitch—this talk of our crumbling bridges and crumbling roads—and to even think about doing something like high-speed rail is very, very ambitious given the fact that we can't even keep the highway trust fund solvent. So funding is *the* big issue, and in my book, I really try to take a little bit of an historical perspective, and I learned so much reporting this book. It started out, to me, I was interested in the human drama of this. I was interested in the people who were jumping up and down saying "we don't want this highway because we like life the way it is without it," vs. the people who were saying "our small town is going to dry up and blow away if we don't get this." As I learned about the history of the interstate system, which, obviously, I won't go into great detail here, but the highway trust fund—the idea that gas taxes would pay for roads--was very much a fluke of history. It was a political compromise, and it was only 54 years ago now. The number of ideas and models and funding scenarios that this company experimented with and has put into play are astounding. The first coast-to-coast east-to-west road in America was the Lincoln Highway, and Carl Fisher, who also started the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, by the way, and developed Miami beach, his idea for paying for it was to get the car companies to give money because they were the ones who were going to benefit from having a road to drive on. Later on, Franklin Delano Roosevelt tried hard to get his committees to study the idea of taking excess land the way they did with the railroads. He thought that if the government was going to pay to build these roads, and the roads were going to increase the value of land along them, that the government should capture that, and that when we build a road out west—one of these new, national networks of roads—the government should be able to take extra land by eminent domain and lease it back for businesses and even houses. That was exactly the thinking with the railroad system. The U.S. government chipped in by giving land, the idea being that the railroads would obviously be able to start new towns, and profit that way. So the recent conversation about "well, should it be vehicle-miles traveled tax, should it be toll roads, should it be privatization"—a lot of these things that seem like they're crazy, wacky ideas are things that have a history in the U.S. There were private turnpikes in America, 200 years ago, before the railroads. The short

answer is that the book makes a point that whether or not you feel like we should build Interstate 69, the mechanisms we use both to decide what to build as a society, and then pay for what we want to build, both of those are broken, I think, or they're not doing what we say we want them to do.

### **We're living off our grandparents' investments**

I don't know if the Golden Gate Bridge fell, if Americans would wake up and decide they want to pay more in gas tax. I don't think that they are equipped with the information to put those two things together, and this is why writing about infrastructure is hard. Writing about it in a way that people can care about is even harder, because this stuff—the scale of it, and the arcane bureaucracy of it—are things that people don't want to think about. Nobody wants to pay more than they're paying now, but everyone wants to have more access than they're having now, and I think it's a little bit of a cultural thing and I think we've just—you could say that society, in general, has been living off credit. We've been living off the stuff that our grandparents built, and we're the ungrateful third generation that doesn't understand exactly how hard it is to build and keep a great country. I talked to Jose Maria Lopez De Fuentes, who is the American head of the Spanish company, Cintra, which is in the consortiums that have leased the Chicago Skyway and the Indiana Toll Road, and a number of projects in other countries. I asked him “how did you find the attitude of Americans?” because he's coming here from Spain where there's a lot of private infrastructure. They don't make a big deal about it over there, and they don't make a big deal of toll roads. And he said “well, this is the thing: we're living in a house and we need a new roof, we need a new boiler, all these things need to be fixed.” Our grandparents built this house. They worked very hard and invested, and we've let it slide. And now it's time for that again. Your question about what will make people realize this, what will really bring the issue to a head, I don't know. I don't know what more could happen. We seem to be very able to imagine it as someone else's problem, or problem to be solved in the future, or of course they could spend money on roads if they stopped spending money on something else. I think, to shift gears a little bit, the pricing of American roads, which is the primary form of personal transportation so it's kind of important, when it comes to our attitudes about this stuff, it's been that the costs are hidden. You fill up your tank, but you don't feel the cost except for congestion. You don't feel the cost to other drivers into the road underneath you. We've been a little bit disassociated from that, so I think ideas like mileage taxes and congestion charges, if communicated correctly, and if that money is reinvested well, I think could be a very powerful educational thing. I think it would be good if a person would type into an onboard computer or their desktop at home “I want to go here,” and instead of just a map of how to get there it will say “you can go there right now. It will cost you this. You can go there in the middle of the night and it will cost you less.” We need to think about how our use of these roads has costs beyond what we see.

**www.InfrastructureUSA.org**  
**212.414.9220**  
**info@infrastructureusa.org**