

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Andrew Herrmann:

More than just a report card

ASCE's report card has 15 categories of infrastructure and we graded them, and the cumulative grade point average is a D. Basically, we're not paying that much attention to our infrastructure and that's been going on for decades. The report card mechanism, the A through F grading system, makes it very clear and easy for people to understand and that's why we use it. Some say it might be too simplistic, but we've actually expanded on the information in the report card. Instead of just a little tri-fold, we now have a 168-page book with backup material and examples. Also, this year we've come out with five key solutions. We've been a thermometer for a long time. We've sort of told you what the temperature of the infrastructure is but we'd like to be a thermostat. We'd like to be able to change that temperature. So we came out with these five key solutions: Increase federal leadership in infrastructure; promote sustainability and resilience; develop federal, regional and state infrastructure plans; address life-cycle costs and ongoing maintenance; and increase and improve infrastructure investment from all stakeholders. So we put those out there, and we actually had five round tables in Washington, DC, called in a number of various experts in different levels—and not just engineers, we're talking policy makers agency people—just to discuss each of those. That was back in January or February of last year. We summarized those and put those into the April edition of ASCE News. It was devoted to that. But then we thought, "Hey we're in the beltway, let's go out and look a little bit further." So we had five additional round tables around the country and we again got local authority owners, local legislators or mayors and we got them to sit in on our round table and discuss it. We came up with some more discussions on how they fund, discussions of problems and we're trying work up solutions from our five key solutions and modify them and make them better. Next year we're actually going to have an infrastructure summit in April, and that's really to pull together maybe 50 or 60 people from all different areas to discuss what we can do to develop a vision for our infrastructure. This is something that we hope we can put together to include what we should do, how we should do it and how we should pay for it. What we'd love above all is if some

of our legislators and our President would steal this vision and use it. So that's coming up. The other thing we're looking forward to this year is commissioning an economic study. This study would basically look at our infrastructure and what would happen if we continue to do nothing. Just basically, what's going to happen to our infrastructure? Is it going to degrade? Is our quality of life going to go down? So that's something we're also looking forward to and we're trying to get some economic/ sociological expertise to work into this so that we can have some realistic numbers and scenarios in that economic study.

Infra failures: just the beginning?

We're just starting to see some of the failures we've had in various areas of infrastructure from pipelines, from water mains. Right now our infrastructure is such that, if someone goes to their sink and turns on a water tap, you get water coming out and that water is clean. But, do they realize that the pipes bringing that water to their sink may be a hundred years old and may be in need of replacement, refurbishment? You can go across all the categories of infrastructure and say the same thing. We haven't really done much to our highway system in decades. It came out in the 50s in the Eisenhower administration when we put the interstates together. We had money back then and we had user fees to pay for that. But the user fees really haven't gone up, but inflation and costs and everything else have gone up and we're just losing ground.

The politics of infra funding

The report card is quoted by a number of people, a number of legislators, all the way up to the President himself. So people are using this information to communicate the fact that our infrastructure is in bad shape, but they lack the courage or political will to move forward on, say, an FAA bill or a highway bill to come up with a funding mechanism. They're just living on their two-year, four-year or six-year election cycles and they just don't want to make the hard decisions. That's very disappointing, because there are a lot of possibilities out there for that funding and some of them are very good and we should go forward on it. Even just a gas tax: if you look at the gas tax, we've probably increased it, the last time was in the early 90s and all our costs and everything have gone up so much in those years and we're just not paying attention to it. The funny thing is, with the oil crisis, our gas prices went up and down and we didn't bat an eye, we may have complained a little bit, but we just paid. We're looking for maybe a quarter a gallon in additional taxes that could really help the infrastructure on the highway side. On the utilities, like water and everything else, basically user fees are what should be paying for our water, our sewage, and all of that, and in some areas they understand that, they can fund it, in other areas they haven't.

Bridges

Engineers are looking at our bridges. There is a federal law that at least every

two years each bridge should be inspected and reported upon, and that information goes back to the various states and also the federal government. If there is a problem with the bridge the engineer out there, if it's something serious, acts immediately. He can close that structure or he can do emergency repairs. So, bridges are being looked at very carefully and they're being watched, but we still have a number of them—due to that watch and inspection—that are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. I believe 26% of the nation's bridges are in those categories. It would be nice to be able to get some funding to bring that number down, to have less than maybe 10% of our bridges structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. The public shouldn't be worried about driving over bridges, because they are being looked at. Any time there is a failure of something, what happens is that the states and the FHWA send out advisories to the owners of bridges around the country and there's a massive look at any similar components.

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