

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Denise Richardson, Managing Director, General Contractors Association of New York**

**Denise Richardson spoke with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA at the 2010 New York State Transportation Summit, sponsored by New York State Department of Transportation, held at McGraw-Hill Conference Center, NYC, 9/24/2010.**

**Denise Richardson:**

### **Construction industry & infrastructure projects**

I think that the construction industry and the infrastructure construction industry developed around large-scale public works projects. So, we have always been a bigger part of the political fabric and the civic engagement aspect of public life, than, say, a different type of for-profit business. Our whole industry developed around building the subway system in 1904, building the interstate highway system, building the waste water treatment plant network (as a result of the clean water act). We in many ways became the private sector arm of government because our industry developed as governments started to say, "this is what we need to invest in." In fact, the General Contractors Association was formed in 1909 during the construction of the original subway system. Our founding members of the GCA were the contractors that were building the subway system back then and they were formed with a goal of being the bridge between labor and government as the business arm of the projects to get things done.

### **We know what we need**

I think that we're at a crossroads in terms of both the national infrastructure discussion and the state and local infrastructure discussion because something has happened in the country as a whole where the public has decided that they are unwilling to pay. So, when we talk about infrastructure projects, we're not having a debate about the need for the project. Everybody acknowledges the need for the project, whatever the project may be; but nobody wants to pay for it. Well, there is no such thing as a free lunch. We need to be able to engage the public to have a discussion about how we pay for these projects and if we're not willing to pay for them with new funds, then what are we willing to give up in our existing government budgets to pay for it, because we're not going to be able to do these projects with no funding.

### **Attitude adjustment required**

When you look at the history of the development of the country we seem to have had this national psychosis, in a way, about infrastructure. If you look at the HBO series a couple of years ago about John Adams, the closing episode where John Adams is advising John Quincy Adams as he is about to take office, John Quincy is saying to his father “There are so many things that I want to do. We need a national road network. We need a national water system. We need a national education system,” and his father looked at him and said, “Yes, but you will never be able to raise taxes.” That was in 1820, and we haven’t progressed much past that discussion. I think the other problem with infrastructure projects is that they have always been treated—by the public and maybe too our industry bears some responsibility as well—as the necessary evil. Architects don’t talk about the aesthetics of infrastructure. Infrastructure is seen as that great hulking wastewater treatment plant or the hulking electrical plant or the road that cut off Brooklyn from itself. We haven’t really used infrastructure in a way that would engage the public. As a matter of fact, we’ve set up this whole model through the environmental impact statement process where the public gets to protest the project, not where the public comes out and talks about why this project is so beneficial. That dynamic is what all of us need to work hard to change.

### **Taking our infra for granted**

I don’t think that I’m pessimistic, but I’m not sure that I’m optimistic because I think that the federal government, state government, local government--at all levels--have an overwhelming set of problems that we’re dealing with, and infrastructure always ends up at the tail end of the problem menu. I think that, right now, we’re so focused on “how do we manage healthcare costs, how do we manage the deficit, how do we keep, on the local level, taxes at a livable level so that we don’t have people having to move to a different location only because they can’t afford their taxes?” When you overlay infrastructure issues on top of that it becomes very, very difficult because we already have it. It may not be what we want, but there is a highway that we drive on, it may take us an hour and a half to get home but we still get home. There is a mass transit network that, yes, could be better, but it works, it’s reliable, we get where we need to go, it’s not in the state that it was 30 years ago. So we continue to take all of this for granted. When we turn on the light switch the lights are there. If Indian point doesn’t get its permit and has to rescale operations in 2013, when we turn on the lights they may not come on, but for right now, we have infrastructure, it all works. We only care about it when it doesn’t work, that’s the problem.

### **Less conversation, more action**

There isn’t a level of urgency, but, more importantly, there is a lack of leadership. Let’s use the Tappan Zeebridge as an example. It bothers me that, to date, various arms of the government and civic community have spent over \$60 million studying the bridge. We all know the bridge needs to be replaced. We know that

it needs some kind of mass transit option; we need to make a decision and build the bridge. How can we turn to the public and say, “well, in exchange for your \$60 million, taxpayers, we have this nice shelf of reports for you to look at.” That, I think is one of the biggest problems that we face. We have got to find a way to streamline the process and until we do that I think the public is going to look at us as a community, what I call the “infrastructure junkies,” and say “you cant deliver anything, therefore we don’t want to give you more money, because you can’t build anything.” That’s one of the biggest problems that we have.

### **Infra education**

I think that, for infrastructure, the internet has been a new lifeline, because whether it’s the Second Ave. subway or the progress of rebuilding the world trade center, the people who are interested in infrastructure can go on the agency websites and get really detailed and thorough up-to-date timely information about the project, how the project is being built. I also think that one of the most effective ways to reach people is through their kids, and I think that one of the things that we have tried to do on a micro level but needs to be done on a larger scale level, is when you have an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student in algebra or a 7<sup>th</sup> grade student in geometry to explain to them “oh, by the way when you are on a road, here’s how algebra figured into the building of the road or the calculation of how much water we need to supply and is there a reservoir for that.” And to take those academic subjects and put them in real life situations and what you then have is a student becoming interested in public works and civil engineering. This is how all of this comes together and I don’t think that we’ve done a good job of emphasizing on a daily basis to people “oh, by the way, all of these things that we take for granted—all of it comes from infrastructure.

**[www.InfrastructureUSA.org](http://www.InfrastructureUSA.org)  
212.414.9220  
[info@infrastructureusa.org](mailto:info@infrastructureusa.org)**