

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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

Robert Paaswell:

We've lost trust in our government

The biggest roadblock, "Why aren't we getting funding" is the current distrust in government. People say "We need to improve our highways," or "High-speed rail's a great thing," or "The airports are terrible and we have to fix them up." But maybe we don't want our government to do it. People don't understand that public infrastructure is really public and I always go back to the fact that one of my heroes, Franklin Roosevelt, during the depression, created all these immense public works. The Hoover Dam got done relatively quickly. Government workers are by and large good. They're talented; they get things done. The government can be as efficient or inefficient as the private sector. If one wants to look at inefficiencies in the private sector they only have to look at banking or the auto industry in the United States for good examples of how really not to do business. We have to find a way of getting over what's become hysteria in this country that the government is no good. That's one. The second, I think, is that one of the real problems with spending money on infrastructure is everybody uses transportation, so we've internalized the costs. Maybe the roads are a little bumpier, I can tolerate this today; maybe it's a little more congested, I can tolerate it today. So we've internalized the cost but we don't recognize that by not focusing on the costs we're creating much greater costs to all aspects of this arc. Our food costs more when it's delivered to us. It takes a little longer for parcels to go. Airports are congested. All these come about because by internalizing the costs we say we're unwilling then to go out and dig into our pockets and get real money out to do them.

America has lost track of what it could be

I think we've lost sight of the fact that there should be a vision of what America can be, what our states can contribute to America, that quality of life is all part of people having jobs and maybe paying a little bit of those taxes out of the jobs to create a general public contribution to a quality of infrastructure. I think part of the problem is that too many other things are put on the table at the same time and they're put on in a confusing way. Should we pay for health care? What

about the war? What about gay marriage? All these things that a number of us think are sideshows and that deviate from the fact that Americans have to invest in the quality of life in their own country. It's really not being addressed because I think of this fractionated approach, basically for individual political gain rather than for collective political improvement.

Americans need a vision, not just a plan

People do drive to work every day, or they ride on crowded subways, or they try to bicycle now. They know that asthma affects kids in crowded cities. A lot of the cities in the old rustbelt in the United States know they have hollowed-out central cities with worn out transit systems. I think people have a sense that things aren't being replaced in the right way and instead of saying, collectively, we have a responsibility to improve them, what happens is that a few people talk a lot and are picked up by the media, and I think the media bears responsibility in this a little bit. Instead of the media being a forum for discussion about it they say, "Your transit authority is bloated and cash-strapped," or "The highway authority has some corrupt deal." So people think that the infrastructure organizations themselves aren't working. And I think that that's the funny thing. I think that some of the language hasn't helped, but by and large I think transportation is interesting because everybody in the United States is a transportation expert. And they all know how to get from A to B. I think the real problem is that we've not been able to come together and put together a true vision, and not a plan, of what we can be with the next generation of infrastructure: a country filled with jobs and opportunities and new businesses and ways of getting kids to school. People are worried about that. We're getting older—ways of moving seniors around in a more constructive way. Right now, in this country there's a fear that we've lost jobs, we're not going to get jobs back and that anything that is suggested with taxes or anything else, there's this horror it's going to kill jobs. It's not going to kill jobs. People aren't going to move away; people aren't going to move from the United States to Sweden or to Mexico or to Canada. People want to be where they live, and a good vision might convince for a few pennies more that you can live where you are and that penny is an investment in a better quality of life.

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