

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

John Robert Smith, President & CEO, Reconnecting America

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

John Robert Smith:

Reconnecting America

Reconnecting America grew out of the Great American Station Foundation, which was created by the city of Meridian, by Amtrak, and by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Others were added, the board changed the name of the organization from the Great American Station Foundation, to Reconnecting America, and changed the thrust of the organization as well. From one of historic station area development and planning, to one of how we craft a vision for transportation for this country for the future, connecting our modes of transportation – not pitting them against each other, but how to really create a seamless transportation center from front door to front door that works in metropolitan areas, small towns and cities, and connects rural America alike. Reconnecting America's focus is how we connect our people to the jobs they want to hold, to the services they need, and to the places they need to travel in order to do their business, or purchase everyday necessities of life. There is a broader transportation component, and there's of course the affordable housing and land-use and master planning that goes with that. Reconnecting America has developed a partnership between Reconnecting America, and the Center for Neighborhood Technologies out of Chicago, and Strategic Economics at Berkeley California, and those three partners have formed the Center for Transit Oriented Development. Which is the nation's really leading not-for-profit solely engaged to do the policy development, the research, and the technical assistance for taking transit and station area developments to reality, so that they function not only best at the moment they open, but function best for that community or neighborhood for the next fifty years.

Transportation infrastructure=Economic Development

Infrastructure, transportation infrastructure, is the backbone for all economic development in this country. And it's been that way since this country was established. I can tell you a constituency that does understand it right now, and that's the mayors of this country. They understand the connection. whether it's a large metropolitan area with mayors like Villaraigosa, or whether it's a smaller city such as North Little Rock Arkansas with Mayor Patrick Henry Hayes, they both understand that transportation is critical for the economic development of their cities, their communities, and their surrounding regions. Mayors also understand

that our transportation infrastructure is crumbling. We've seen it: bridge collapses, we see it in highways that are in deteriorating conditions, and those conditions are spread throughout this country. And mayors know, and council members know, that until we invest in that which allows us to build a commerce, and build industry, and to ship goods, until we take that seriously as a nation, then we're going to continue to fall further and further behind not only Europe, but China, the larger Asia, India, all of these areas of the world are investing very, very heavily in development of the newest, most cutting edge infrastructure transportation systems. And of course system is important. You don't just build the highway, or the light rail. It's how they connect. It is a part of a whole system, and until we think holistically about transportation infrastructure in the US like our international competitors have, then we're going to continue to see a very difficult course for developing industry, and the creation of jobs in this country. You know government doesn't really create jobs; government creates opportunity for the private sector to create jobs. And one of the chief ways government does that is providing these basic infrastructure needs so that your employees can get to work, so you can ship your goods – whether it's by highway or by rail or by air – and that your people can be connected one to the other. Government exists to provide for their people that which the people cannot provide for themselves. A common defense is certainly the first thing that comes to mind, whether that's a national army, or the local police force. But also I can't provide the necessary infrastructure to get me home to visit my grandchildren. I have to rely on a larger partner. There's a large federal piece there, there is a state piece that needs to be played, and ultimately a local piece when I arrive there in the community. And we must begin to think that way, and to plan that way, and to invest that way. I would say: can we afford not to invest in transportation infrastructure in this country? And I do think the American people, as it is explained to them, understand that. They understand that a lot more clearly when gas was \$4 a gallon, I certainly believe it's headed back that way again, and it is too late to begin to divine your transportation solutions when you're facing gas which makes it too high for someone who holds a service sector job to pay for gas and get to work and buy the groceries and take care of their children.

We're divided, but we want to connect

We've been unfortunately engaged in many topics that have been very divisive and honestly did not help stand this country back up on it's feet after the terrific economic downturn that we had. The public goes about their daily life. They expect those in elected office to handle these larger issues in their best interest. I think they are seeing that we are missing opportunities as a country. As they move more about this country they're recognizing when they are cut off. For example, I spent the better part of two weeks in the state of Montana. They understand very directly--and this is a large swath of the public that I would meet with from city to city--that their transportation, how they're connected from one city to the other through out the state, is a very difficult issue for them. And they

want solutions. Certainly the highways are important, but they want other options as well. So I think you're beginning to see that ground swell develop from not only big metropolitan areas, but from what we call "more rural" states. I've spent some time in Maine, and the communities in Maine get it. The Downeaster, it's an Amtrak service there that's been very, very successful, so successful it's going to be extended further north – and as you meet with the communities, including the citizens within those communities served by the Downeaster, they understand the importance of that connection which connects not only their cities, but connects them back into the larger metropolitan areas where a lot of the jobs are. So I think you're beginning to see that change.

Long range planning is needed not reaction to crisis

About marching on the mall, generally that kind of zeal comes from a crisis point and I think that we've been at that crisis point in the past. When the Shah fell and you couldn't buy gas at any price after dark because the tanks were empty at all of the service stations, and, you basically didn't travel at night during that time. In fact, Congress was discussing limiting you to when you could buy gas based on whether you had an even or an odd tag number for your car. That's how critical it got. And there were lots of discussions about other modes of transportation, and we must invest so we can be truly independent. When the cost of gas came back down, we forgot all those lessons. We saw it again, certainly after September the 11th when the only way you could get in and out of the nation's capital and the largest city in this country was by passenger rail. And then we saw it again, briefly, when gas got over \$4 dollars a gallon in this country. So a zeal comes from a crisis point, but what we're talking about takes such long range planning and implementation that by the time you wait for the crisis to generate the enthusiasm, you're ten years at least until there's a solution. We have to anticipate that crisis point and be actively engaged in making more inclusive transportation solutions today. We have our Transportation Authorization Bill looming, and we better get it right at this opportunity or we basically lose a decade of proper planning and implementation for the future.

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