

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Kathy Caldwell, P.E., F.ASCE, President, American Society of Civil Engineers

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Kathy Caldwell:

Awareness of infrastructure is growing

There's a growing admittance, public recognition, that they've taken advantage of the fact when I turn on my tap, I get a drink of water that I can immediately consume. And you know it doesn't cost very much when I look at my monthly bill. I think you could even take the recent snowstorms and say 'okay well, a snowstorm can just illustrate what happens when I'm not able to get to work, what happens when my children are not able to get to school,' the setbacks that are realized by that, and I think that's resulting in growing acknowledgment of the quality of life that's served by our infrastructure. The young generation is especially interested in making the world a better place to live, and how best to do that but through improvement in the infrastructure. And not only here in our country but across the world, and I think they're interested in making those connections.

Education leads to engagement

Education is key to this issue because we need the general public to vote with their pocketbooks, to improve the infrastructure to make their quality of life better; to turn around and increase the income that's available to them. Every year they sit in traffic is costing them \$800, right out of their wallets. I know I could find a better use for \$800, and I suspect a lot of other citizens could as well. And when you educate and put things in that kind of perspective, then we find the American public, they're pretty savvy and intelligent. They'll make connections, and again, do the right thing when it comes to making decisions about how tax dollars are spent, how projects are prioritized, pressuring bipartisanship politics and politicians to develop a vision for where are we going in this country with our infrastructure and in our global competitiveness because of the infrastructure.

Reaching out to young people

We find that young people will go home and share with their parents "Wow do you know how this works? Here's what I learned today." We have things like ASCEville on our website where young people can experiment what it takes to build a road, to provide water, to take that water for treatment so it can be used

again, so education, reaching out to the different aspects of society so that they'll feed off each other and support each other is one way of doing that.

Engaging citizens without more disasters

Well it's unfortunate that sometimes it takes a failure, a catastrophe, to bring the criticality of the infrastructure to light. But I think there are positive ways to do that as well. I think it's the engagement that you talk about, the education that you talk about, generating the excitement about new projects that are improving life quality, the interest in green infrastructure, sustainable infrastructure. It's all linked together to raise awareness and move us in the direction that we need to go on this subject. Certainly ASCE is going to keep the pressure on and stay in the forefront; we've outlined steps that the country can take to improve our grades, and just like a parent with a child that's struggling through school, they're going to have to get engaged to make a difference, to bring those grades up. And I think if we can continue to make that connection, we'll make a positive difference. But I hope it won't take more flooded basements, waterline breaks, the return of waterborne diseases, to illustrate the criticality of the infrastructure.

The ASCE Report Card

We're especially encouraged by its use both on the Hill and in other types of communications forums. I'm not sure if you saw the "Dirty Jobs" episode where Mike Rowe used our infrastructure report card to connect the condition of the infrastructure to the people that are trying to maintain the infrastructure, to the quality of life enjoyed by the American public. We have to have some more people who are willing to stand up and take a leadership role, and say that the infrastructure deserves equal footing with the other multi-million/trillion dollar problems that are facing our nation. The Report Card serves to prove the need, and now it's time to implement the solutions. We have proposed five primary solutions that we feel will move this issue forward. But it's going to take leadership at every level, leadership from the federal government as well as leadership from our mayors and governors at the state and local level, and some creativity and innovation.

Working toward a better report card

I think we can make steps to improve the grades. If we can get approval, the transportation authorization transportation funding, if we can continue to get bipartisan recognition of the role that the infrastructure plays in our global competitiveness, the role that infrastructure can play in helping to get us out of this current economic slump by putting us back to work in a constructive way. I tend to be positive that we'll see some improvement. We're starting to see some movements in the right direction. While there are those who may be critical, for instance the stimulus program and the stimulus monies that serve as a down payment. It's a move in the right direction, and if we can take the positive results

from that down payment and equate that to 2.2 trillion that's needed to take us all the way then I think that'll move us in the right direction. That'll be helpful.

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