

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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**Conversation with Steven CF Anderson, Managing Director,
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Cecilia Estolano:

Infra & the environment

At this point, we definitely need to look at different urban forms. Here in California we spend a lot of time thinking about that because we've got the most progressive legislation around climate change – dealing with climate change – and we've actually integrated looking at greenhouse gas emissions with our land use transportation and environmental planning. We have a statute called SP375 that requires our regions to think about how land use, forms of land use, and land use patterns affect our greenhouse gas emissions. So we have put in an increasing emphasis on compact urban development, the need to invest in public transportation, the need to integrate retail, residential, job zones all together to make it much easier for people to move around and to move goods and services around. Where we're headed, from an environmental standpoint, requires us to think differently about our urban form and requires us to invest in the very building blocks of prosperity which I would see as transportation, water infrastructure, energy infrastructure.

Water: much neglected infra

What people don't understand in this country is that we have about half a trillion dollars worth of deferred maintenance in investment in our water infrastructure in this country. Our drinking water systems are on the brink of collapse. We have increasing stories about cryptosporidium and other types of public health outbreaks because we just simply aren't maintaining our (leave in) drinking water systems. We also have a problem with sewage spills, and combined sewer overflows; and for our constituency groups, communities of color and low income and moderate income folks, this is of particular attention because the sewer systems in the places that our communities live tend to be the (leave in) oldest ones. They haven't been rehabilitated, they haven't been rebuilt, so the most vulnerable of our society – the most vulnerable communities – are also most susceptible to the impact of deferred maintenance and investment of infrastructure. You'll have sewage spills in communities of color, you'll have overflows into our waterways so that folks can't use the beach for recreation or can't swim in nearby lakes. And people increasingly don't have faith in their drinking water systems, so this also ties into the environment. We have this huge

increase in people buying bottled water, because they simply don't have faith and confidence that the water coming out of their tap is safe and good to drink. This not only enormously inefficient, it's just not the right thing for America. It really ought to be a right in this country that you can turn on your tap and be confident that your child drinking the water from that tap will be safe and healthy.

Why we need to invest in water

We need to make a substantial investment in the water systems in our country, but we also need to do it differently. We need to think about systems that are more integrated with the environment. We need to look at green infrastructure investment in the water sector so that we aren't just moving as much rain water as quickly as possible into the ocean, we need to think about – and I'm speaking here in southern California where this is of particular attention – we need to do a better job of capturing our rainwater, reusing it, recycling it, and using appropriate water for appropriate uses. We have to handle our water resources much more efficiently and in a way that's much more in keeping with the natural ecosystem and the way that water is naturally recycled. Which leads us into issues like basic infrastructure. We need to do something about ripping up so much of the concrete in our society, and having more permeable surfaces so we capture our rainwater and re-infiltrate into our ground water. It also means we can get multiple benefits from this: We can create more recreational space in urban areas that are sadly lacking in open space by taking old parking lots and creating green areas that capture rain water and reuse them. This is something we've done a lot of work on in southern California, Los Angeles has a couple of really great examples of places where instead of just using traditional gray infrastructure approaches, we thought about trying to plant trees, grassy swells, capture rainwater, divert it, put it into tanks that can then infiltrate into the ground water, rather than just shooting it out into the Los Angeles River and then straight out into the ocean.

How to engage the public

I think because we say "infrastructure", and things like "public-private-partnership," people glaze over. Those of us who work in this field can get caught up in a lot of jargon that just doesn't translate to real people. But when you talk to people about drinking water, about streets, about getting from point A to point B quickly and safely in a nice clean bus or light rail system, they get it. And people are willing to invest in infrastructure, and people understand that these infrastructure systems create good paying jobs. People get it; we're just not using the language that translates in a way that folks understand it. I think we do tend to talk about jargon; we talk about things like the gas tax, we talk about mechanisms and public policy institutions instead of talking about the basic building blocks of our cities and our society. And when you talk to communities about things like their water system, or about transportation, in plain language, they not only get it, they're willing to invest in it and in many cases they're willing

to tax themselves to see it built. And I'll give you a specific example: here in Los Angeles a few years ago in the middle of this recession, voters of Los Angeles county voted to increase their sales tax so that they could invest \$40 billion dollars over 30 years into a better public transportation system. That's pretty extraordinary that people were willing to do it. They know that we need to be able to get around this community much faster and much more efficiently, and they were willing to make that investment. And we here in Los Angeles are then trying to leverage our willingness to tax ourselves, to pull down federal resources to accelerate the pace at which we can build out this public transportation system. It's really important because we need the jobs now, and if we can accelerate it into 10 years rather than 30 years, we're going to be addressing really a severe recession here in southern California. So how do we engage people? We talk about basic systems. We talk about drinking water, we talk about capturing rain water, talk about being able to have open space and when we speak in those terms, we find that communities respond. So that's what I think, and I think there really hasn't been a concerned effort to engage the public nationally about this debate. That's why the President's speech, the State of the Union Address, was so important that he was raising this at a national level as an investment strategy. And I think that is important, to have messages from the very top talking about the need to investment in ourselves, to lay the foundation for future prosperity, that's going to be critical. I think it's something that resonates with regular folks.

Infra needs the right messenger

We have to look at who the messengers are. And particularly in the last 20 years the environmental movement, and the environmental community, have been really affective in recruiting well-recognized messengers—people from popular culture—to deliver the message of the importance of the environment. That's why environmental consciousness continues to grow rapidly in our society. It's just accepted now. But the involvement of key, credible, popular figures is important. I don't see anybody – a popular action figure or an actor – talking about infrastructure. Talking about the benefits of high-speed rail. Talking about the importance of reinvesting in America. That is the issue we need to talk about: reinvesting in America. The President talked about winning, that's great rhetorical flourish, but we need to talk about the basic foundations for prosperity, and people will get it, and let's find some good messengers to do that. So we at Green for All, we're talking about trying to take the environmental movement and make it more accessible to communities that might not think of themselves as environmentalists, but they're pretty deeply – they have deeply held environmental values. So we'll work with messengers like The Black Eyed Peas, or Drake, popular figures who are current, hip, happening. No one's ever accused infrastructure folks of being hip or happening, right? We need to think about finding good spokespeople who can talk to different audiences to excite them so that they want to hug that high-speed rail train. Second thing is, I do believe that the message between jobs and investment in infrastructure or

investment in the building blocks of society, that does resonate with people. Again, cities in California, we voted on the ballot – Californians voted to invest in \$8 billion dollars worth of high-speed rail. That's very impressive, people were excited about it; they get it. They absolutely get "gee whiz" technology. Now we're in the tough time of trying to get it located and sited, and make it happen. But that concept of a new high-speed way of connecting with each other and bypassing our crowded airports and freeways, people appreciate it – they get it. What Americans want is forward thinking. They want to paint a vision of what our society could be: clean, quick, environmentally sustainable transportation systems. Water systems that don't pillage the environment, that replenish the environment, and create new parks in our urban core. Energy systems that pull from abundant resources like the sun and the wind rather than drawing and damaging our oceans, polluting our communities. Abundant renewable energy sources: People get it but you have to paint a vision for the future. It can't just be about "oh, everything's falling apart and everything's crumbling." You want to paint for them that we in America can create a nice, clean, functioning society that does not destroy the environment, that is not depleting the environment but is replenishing the environment. And we can create a lot of good jobs doing that. So, part of it is the message; part of it is the messengers. And I think particularly folks who are avid about infrastructure really do tend to "geek out" and tend to use a lot of jargon, spend a lot of time talking about financing mechanisms and the complexity of policy, and we need to do that obviously when we're in the halls of Congress and we're dealing with elected officials and talking to finance folks, but when we're trying to communicate with the public? We have to have a broader vision, and we need to break things down and make them attractive and compelling. Otherwise we're not going to build the consensus we need for the multiple of billions of dollars it's going to take to rebuild this country.

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