

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Marc Morial, President & CEO, National Urban League, and former Mayor of New Orleans

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Marc Morial:

Economic empowerment & transportation infra investment

We look at the transportation issue through the lens of jobs. Jobs are our number one theme for 2011. It is one of the four components of our “I am empowered” campaign, and so when we look at this it is a jobs issue. Not only the jobs created by transportation infrastructure and who builds it, but the jobs that people have access to if the transportation systems are intact. I have visited certain cities recently—I believe I was in Indianapolis—you still have cities in the United States that do not have regional transportation systems. What that means today is that inner-city residents do not have access to jobs that might be located outside of the city. It might be located in the inner-ring suburbs. So, when you think of transportation and transportation infrastructure, it affects jobs and economic empowerment on every level, and that’s what The Urban League stands for: economic empowerment.

Turning apathy into passion

If we look at the 20th century, massive and significant investments in infrastructure—whether it be developing public transit systems, to the interstate highway system, to building a system of parks, playgrounds, museums and community centers—really, really advanced the economic development and economic fortunes and jobs of the 20th century. I think, to some extent, we take infrastructure investment for granted, and by taking it for granted we don’t pay attention to how important it is, in terms of connecting people to jobs, making sure that housing is connected to public facilities that enhance the quality of life, like parks and playgrounds and libraries, which we not only have to build but make sure that people can connect to. I think if people take a step back, and really understand how important this is and what it really means to their lives, they wouldn’t take it for granted and they would become passionate about it.

Infra decisions affect everyone

It’s without question that we could make a giant leap and a giant stride. I would urge people to take a look at what nations like China are doing. I visited China a year ago. They’re building high-speed rail, they’re building transportation and non-transportation infrastructure throughout the nation. It’s a big part of how they

view the development of their economy, and in the United States we do take it for granted. The transportation debate becomes a discussion of only those most interested: road builders, planners, some elected officials. When I was the mayor of a city, took a great interest in ICTEA and TEA-21 and how they were shaped. But we have a chance—I think, now, it's not only a chance; it's an imperative—to pay attention to what this formula is about.

Greater dialogue needed about equity in infra policy

There's not a lot of dialogue because, I think, all too often we need a greater number of community leaders, local and national elected officials to pay attention to the dynamics. Paying attention to the dynamics means paying attention to more than “did I get a pet project or an earmark process in the bill?” What the formulas are—because no matter how many project specifics are in the bill, it's the formula dollars that are really going to define how this money is spent and what communities are ultimately impacted. We need people to wake up—elected officials, community leaders—to wake up and understand the social justice and racial justice and the fairness dynamic, and it has to be built-in to the new transportation bill.

Infra & governmental failures in New Orleans

We had a big focus on upgrading one component of flood control in Louisiana. The sub-surface drainage system, which removes rainwater and pumps it into the canals that take it to the lake and ultimately to the gulf—it was the levees along those canals that ultimately broke. What we learned is that they were not adequately engineered; they were poorly constructed. In some cases the construction specifications were not even followed in, quote, the depth of the piling that was driven. And then we saw afterwards the failure of the Federal government to adequately and quickly recognize that they had to do their responsibility to help to rebuild those neighborhoods fully and completely. It still remains both the failure of the levees and the post-Katrina commitment, and the way it was undertaken when the earliest plans talk about allowing neighborhoods that had been destroyed to remain destroyed. It will remain one of the great black marks on the government of the United States.

Infra equity

It's on multiple levels. It's to make sure, for example, that the formulas and how the projects are built and where they are built, certainly be designed to help empower locked-out and left-out communities to have access to jobs and community improvement. On the second level, it's also about the jobs. Who will participate in the building of the transportation infrastructure? I've long been a proponent of that the transportation bill itself needs measures, provisions, language which requires and mandates that disadvantaged workers, businesses owned by people of color and women, have a fair and a greater opportunity to participate in the building of this infrastructure. It's everyone's taxpayer dollars.

Infrastructure and transportation infrastructure touches all 50 states in the union. It probably touches virtually every county in the United States. Therefore, it is important that everyone have a participatory role in building it. I think that we've fallen short in that area in the past, and equity is not only about where it's built and what's built, but it's also about who builds it and what businesses have an opportunity to grow and benefit from it too.

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