

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

The Transit Riders for Public Transportation is a national campaign initiated by the Labor/Community Strategy Center and Bus Riders Union.

Transit Riders for Public Transportation: civil rights and transit funding

The Transit Riders for Public Transportation National Campaign is a campaign of 17 organizations across the country. We're a civil rights and environmental justice national campaign specifically working to shift the terms of the debate nationally around the Federal Surface Transportation Act, which, as we know, could be anywhere from 300 to 500 billion dollars for the next six years. I am more specifically working to get more funds to operate transit systems in the country through these massive fare increases and service cuts that are happening. Atlanta lost 25% of its service, New York has raised fares three times over the last couple of years, Los Angeles has lost almost half a million hours of bus service, and Chicago laid off about a thousand workers, so definitely getting more money to operate transit systems. Much of the focus of the Federal Surface Transportation Act is usually on building, and building, and building, and yet there isn't as much emphasis put on actually operating. The second thing is we're trying to also enforce civil rights regulations. The Department of Transportation has Title 6 regulations, which prohibit racial discrimination by any federal recipient, and so at this point we're trying to strengthen some of those Title 6 regulations and their enforcement. So those are our two areas of focus for our national campaign.

Infra investment should benefit those who need it most

Across many urban and rural centers, the majority of bus riders, the most dependant on bus – and train, to a certain extent – are people of color and low-income people. So in Los Angeles, for example, the average bus rider makes about \$15,000 a year, and of the 500,000 bus riders, 86% are people of color. We see the same in places like San Francisco, the Bay area, and places across the United States, and so for us, transportation or transit investments, are very, very much tied to the most dependant people on public transportation: the folks that take very long commutes across the county, or across the region. We see repeatedly at the federal level that 80% of the massive Federal Surface Transportation Act is being put into highways, roads and freeways, and only 20% of these funds go to transit. And even within that, many of the investments that

happen are not necessarily creating jobs for the folks in the community, not necessarily benefiting the most transit dependant. Many times it's a lot of pork: a lot of multi-billion dollar rail lines that don't necessarily benefit the most dependant.

Public transit is gaining more attention

I think in the last couple of years, we probably – as a national campaign – have seen the most engagement by many people across the country. There is ourselves, the Transit Riders for Public Transportation There is the Amalgamated Transit Union, who represents thousands of transit workers that's meeting in D.C. this week actually, where there is going to be a pretty historic meeting between riders, and transit drivers and mechanics, to try and figure out how to shape national transit policy. There is Transportation Equity Network, which has over 300 groups across the country working for equitable investments in transportation, and there's Transportation For America. So this time around I think there's a lot of attention that's being put on this massive legislation, especially because the country is going through both an economic crisis, and also an oil crisis, and the crisis of having a lot of the social services – the social safety– they're being completely yanked from the bottom. And so, I think that with a lot of the service cuts and fare increases that are being passed over the last couple years, places like St. Louis, which lost half of its bus service a couple years ago, there's a lot more attention by both community groups as well as legislators who are saying "How do we actually create a more equitable share of funding for the basic as operating our systems in this time when we need to stimulate people's pockets by keeping the money in their pockets, at the same time trying to maintain jobs and create them?"

Americans need to get involved

I'm not even sure Americans really know who makes the decisions at the end of the day around their transportation service, or even the roads and freeways and all of the basic things that people rely on. I think there is, unfortunately, somewhat of a crisis of people not even being informed that there is a 500 billion dollar Federal Surface Transportation Act, second only to the defense bill. I think that more and more we're seeing a culture of consumerism, a culture of people not understanding basic legislative processes, a culture of people being very much enamored with their automobiles, and very much about keeping gas prices down and not even being clear why or how. And so people often times – if they're even aware of the issues – are acting out of annoyance or anger about being inconvenienced in any way versus being active. And at the end of the day, what's needed is more organizations on the ground, educating—as tedious as it could look or could be, practically door-to-door—both drivers and transit riders, and transit workers, to create a more national debate. I have been told before in meetings with Congressional staffers that even within the chambers of Congress, transportation isn't one of the big, hot ticket, issues. So I think that it's both a

responsibility of the “movement” that exists to raise this issue to a national profile both inside congress as well as on the ground in their own cities.

Infra opportunities

I think we're at a little bit of a crossroads. We had two years of the Obama Administration; there was an opening many of us kind of went out there, trying to see what openings and policies we could shift. I think that the 2-year window is kind of not there anymore, and what's happening is we're at a crossroads. Many people are saying we're now on the defensive – I mean I'm not trying to sound more negative – but we're a little bit on the defensive. We see the current House, as definitely a challenge: the new House, with these Republicans. We also see that there are things slated to be cut. So not only do we see this tremendous opportunity for creating jobs, but we also see this as kind of a dangerous time where we need to protect. Also pots of money like Very Small Starts that funds a lot of the capital projects on the ground, that could be completely gone because we're seeing an environment that's a lot more about having cost savings and being frugal. So I think definitely there's a lot of work because there's positives in infrastructure investment, but also I think we are going to have to play a little defensive in trying to protect some of these infrastructure investments.

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