

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Maya Wiley:

Re-framing the infra dialogue

We're not having a national dialogue. Well, I guess what I would say is we're not having the national dialogue we should have. We are having a national dialogue, but it's a veiled dialogue on infrastructure because it's essentially a dialogue about not investing in it. Either because of the deficit questions, because of the questions about what should be privatized and what should be in the realm of private sector; and so the truth is our conversations all touch on infrastructure all the time but we're not consciously thinking about it in that way. And infrastructure is tough because people are much more likely to respond to things that are emotional issues for them, and infrastructure is hard to be very emotional about. For instance, it's easier to talk about healthcare reform because you can talk about whether people are able to see their doctor or not. And even though healthcare includes infrastructure issues, we're not really talking about it as infrastructure. We're talking about it as the emotional piece of what people get from it. And I think when we think and talk about transportation or broadband, or other forms of infrastructure, we're talking about it in a way that doesn't talk about it connected to people's lives, and also in a context in which it's charged in this debate about the role of government, and the importance of the deficit. So, I actually think we're talking about it quite a lot and don't realize we're talking about it quite often in the public discourse, and so we have a bad conversation about it. And I also think those of us who want to talk about it probably really need to deeply rethink how we talk about it.

Infrastructure is a civil rights issue

I think that part of what is happening, that people are not necessarily thinking of consciously--and I actually talked to someone who does some communication testing about this--is we start talking about transportation as racial justice or civil rights issue, people do understand it as "are those people going to be able to get to my community? Because I don't really want that." And that happens at a very subconscious level, not necessarily even at a conscious level, but it makes it very hard to talk about investments and public transit that connects people in inner cities to jobs in the suburbs. We are a car culture, and so it's also hard for people to grapple with just how bread and butter it is for so many people, and how many people really are disconnected from opportunities as a result of it. So there's a

level of not really getting or understanding the level of impact it has in people's lives. So I think it absolutely is a civil rights issue, it's fundamental to transforming opportunity for communities of color in particular, and of course it would have benefits for the nation as a whole, and I think we have to grapple with the very hard reality of what transportation sometimes represents to people, and therefore – even as a civil rights issue – they oppose it.

Infra investment is fundamental to solving so many of our problems

We have a crumbling infrastructure. When we talk about roads, subways, busses; when we talk about broadband and wifi access; when we talk about school buildings, and water, and sewer lines and all these things that are what we are talking about when we call infrastructure we are talking about things that fundamentally shape whether we're building prosperity, or whether we're undermining it. And if we are to, particularly at a time when prosperity-building is job critical and we have far too many people without jobs, we have to figure out how to not just compete globally, but to really build a sustainable economy in which we can all participate and, frankly, a sustainable environment in which we can all live – which is also what we're talking about with infrastructure – and healthy lives, and healthy people, we have to invest in infrastructure. And I think it's so fundamental and so foundational to actually solving so many of the problems we have, both for people, like communities of color, who have been fundamentally lacking in the investments to produce this kind of infrastructure over time. In the long run – because it's going to be the majority of the country – we're actually saying we're not going to invest in the majority of the country. Imagine a scenario in which we actually said “Yeah, you know, that 55% of the country, we don't really – we're not going to go there.” It's really incredible, right? For the future of any democracy.

The future depends on infra investment

If the Blacks and Latinos are six times more dependant on public transit than are people who are white – and of course if you did rural/urban analysis you would obviously have huge transportation issues in rural communities of all races, Native American as well. When you start talking about the demographics of the country, which is that by 2032 the majority of the people under the age of 34 in this country will not be white, and when you couple that with unemployment rates in this country – which, despite the fact that we hover around 8%-9% in this bad economy, in communities of color, and particularly for young people of color can be as high as 50%--and when you start to recognize that the jobs are not in those communities, that the infrastructure like transit is not there. And that for an economy you require transit and various forms of transportation in order to have trade, to move goods, to have jobs, to help people get to jobs, to create jobs, then again you have to think about how fundamentally important it is for the country to think about the vast majority of people for whom we have never made these types of transportation investments. And the additional piece that I think we

talk about, but even less so: if we're talking about climate change and we're talking about the need to control greenhouse gas emissions for our children, and our children's children, we can't get there if we don't invest in the capacity for a majority of people in the country to reduce their carbon emissions. Which is essentially what we're doing when we avoid transit investment in communities of color.

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