

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

David C. Chavern, Executive Vice President & COO, U.S. Chamber of Commerce

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

David C. Chavern:

Connecting the dots: investment and availability

Let's start with some of the challenges we have with the public. Infrastructure is the bones of the economy; it's the foundation on which all of our economic growth, jobs, our prosperity is based. But people don't like to think about bones. As long as they got to work today, then it seems fine. If they flip the light switch and the electricity came from the magic place from wherever it came from, and they use their phones and that magic happened, then they don't want to think about everything that underlies that, all the investments that underlie that. You are challenged to want to educate people about what happens when you've thrown the light switch. Why our lack of investments costs them personally, and why we all have to make investments. And they really are investments in this regard: in our economy so that we have continued prosperity in the future and it's a challenge. We have been advocating for an increase in the gas tax for a number of years. The American public does not like an increase in the gas tax primarily because there is a distance between where they see paying and where they see benefit. We have to connect those dots.

Investing in what makes sense

Well, high-speed rail may make sense in some geographic areas, but you have to be really smart about which geographic areas because it's really, really expensive, and long-term it's very expensive. So if their individual governors say "it doesn't make sense for our state," we're not really second guessing those folks. That being said, we're also not saying it doesn't make sense anywhere. There's probably some dense urban areas where it does make sense. But I have to tell you, I'm always amazed by the bus system. For five bucks you can take a bus now from New York to Washington, D.C. Now that's going to get harder and harder to do as our roads become more and more inefficient and broken down and everything else. We're pro mass transit but you have to take each piece at a time to see what's the most cost-effective solution.

Competition is a good thing

We do have a competitiveness issue in a range of areas. To some degree, we suffer from the fact that we developed before some of these other countries and they get to go to the latest and best technology right away, but long-term we just have to buy into the idea that, yes, we are competing with China; yes, we are competing with India, and, by the way, that's not bad. Our American history says that competition isn't bad; competition makes us better. We kind of live and breathe that every day, so we just need to get our mojo back as a country and understand that if we're in a competition, we're going to win it. Politically, that can be a tough argument, but that's where we need to get and, frankly, we're optimists. The U.S. has a tremendous history of reinventing itself and a tremendous capacity amongst its people. We just need to focus on getting it done.

Infrastructure needs a narrative

I think it has historically been part of the dialogue about progress, and the trains were about progress and the interstate highway system was about progress. I think you got to a point where people didn't believe where the progress was going, and we need to get back to a very good narrative about what infrastructure investments we need to make and then, most particularly, how that's going to be better for you the individual tomorrow and better for your kids. People believe that with the railways, people believe that with interstate highway systems, and we kind of have to get back to storytelling because people have dropped the idea that infrastructure development means progress. After all, the electricity went on this morning and their telephone worked. The difficult part is you can't wait until the electricity doesn't come on for them to get serious about it. It's up to us as the business community to be better story tellers about what we need to do today and why that's important for you as an individual.

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