

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Jay Walder, Chairman & CEO, New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority

Steven C.F. Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA, spoke with Jay Walder at Regional Plan Association's 21st annual Regional Assembly, "Innovation and the Global City." The event took place on April 15th in New York City.

Jay Walder:

The greatest infra investment in history

If you take a somewhat longer period of time and, say, for example let's go back about 30 years, you have actually seen one of the greatest investments in infrastructure in the history of our country: the New York transit system, which is really, frankly, the lifeblood of this city and this region. That transit system had been allowed to decay. I mean, if we were sitting today in the middle of mid-town Manhattan in the early 1980s we would have seen a transit system that had largely become a national symbol of urban decay. But, at that time a program was started, an effort was started to rebuild this great transit system, to invest in the infrastructure, invest in our rolling stock, our tracks, our stations, our power plants, our communications equipment, et cetera—every aspect of the transit system—and that program has really continued for the last thirty years. We've invested over sixty billion dollars right now. And I think the proof of that story shows up in so many different ways. It shows up in the mean distance between breakdowns in our subway fleets, which, back thirty years ago was 7,500 miles between failure and today it's 170,000 miles. It shows up in railroad that we run the Metro North Railroad where we've invested in all the various aspects to that and people complain now if the on-time performance is less than 98 percent because that's what they've come to expect. And it shows up in the utilization of our transit system every way that we go around that today 50% more people are actually riding our transit system every single day than were using it just fifteen years ago. So, I think what we've seen is the ability to recognize the issue, to grapple with it, to make the investments, to sustain them over a long period of time and to rebuild this so that the transit system moves from being this symbol of decay, the sense of the failure of our city, to actually the fundamental underpinning of our success.

Investment must continue

We are very much in a period in which we have challenges in front of us; let's not kid ourselves. New York has really done something very special over the last

number of years. It moved beyond its basic infrastructure to actually saying, “what do we need to do to continue to be the world-leading 21st century city” and one of the things that we needed to do was to be able to continue to invest in our transit system to the development of new lines, new connections, more capacity, more ways to be able to do things, because in fact the development of our city over the last hundred years and our region over the last hundred years doesn’t necessarily equal the same thing as it looked in 1904 when the New York City subway system opened in the very first phase. So, today we have the challenge of really being able to do two things. For many years we put off this challenge of new investments but today we have the challenge of this investment that we’re making. Some of the largest transportation projects in our country are right here in the middle of New York City, right underneath where we’re sitting. Right now, in Manhattan, just north of Grand Central Terminal, is the largest transit project in the United States of America. It’s 140 feet below the ground so you don’t know that it’s here so you don’t know that it’s here but that’s what’s going on right now. And today we have the challenge of moving these projects forward and finishing these projects that are all actively under construction with billions of dollars of investments, but at the same time we need to continue to make the investments to earn our core infrastructure on the hundreds and hundreds of miles of track and equipment and everything that goes into the 8.5 million people every single day who utilize our transit system. And finding the way to be able to do this and finding the capacity, the financial capacity to be able to do this even in these difficult economic times is our challenge. What we have to find a way to do, what I firmly believe we need to find a way to do is to invest. This is not a grant. This is not a loan. It’s an investment in our future.

The NYC region depends on transit infra

I think, look, we’re sitting at a time right where, in many ways counterintuitive to what we might have expected, the importance of cities, not just in America, across the world is growing. We’re recognizing that despite the technology, despite the ability to be able to send email and do other things, we want to be in cities, we like what happens in cities, we need to be there; it’s how our economies have continued to grow. And a larger and larger portion of the population around the world is actually in and is projected to be in urban areas. What makes that possible is infrastructure. It’s not possible without that. You can’t imagine the island of Manhattan, the economic activity that’s taking place here, without the transportation infrastructure that’s allowing us not just to think about this as a city, not just to think about this as a borough but to think about it as a region because we’re able to think about our transportation system knitting together everything that is happening around here and allowing people to be able to move and do that. The encouragement, I think, that has really come and the reason why I’m so passionate about it is that we rarely get to see, in some of these things, the fruits of our labors as clearly as we are seeing them in our transit system right now. I started my career in the early 1980s; I began my work

in my career on the very first capital program for the MTA and I think that the reason that I think you see it is that New Yorkers have turned around and said “I want this system; I depend on this system again and I’m using this system again.” Whether you get on the train at 7am or 7pm or midnight or one o’clock in the morning, New Yorkers are using it. It is their lifeblood. And it’s happened because of the investments we’ve made in infrastructure. That’s what made that possible because people now believe that it’s safe and it’s reliable and it’s quick and it’s clean and it’s going to get them where they want to go, and watching people and watching the change that that has had in our city, in our region, watching its success is incredibly encouraging. It is a monumental success story.

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