

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

The Leadership Conference

We are a coalition of over 200 civil and human rights organizations, and together our aim is to work towards building an America that's as good as its ideals. I will say our founding really was steeped in transportation and equity and access to public accommodations. Among our founders was A. Phillip Randolph, the founder and leader of Sleeping Car Porters. We see transportation equity as intrinsic to our goal of being a civil and human right coalition and showing that our transportation systems are affordable, accessible and really can provide the access to our communities to housing, healthcare, jobs and education. So to some it may be surprising, but to The Leadership Conference transportation equity is truly a civil and human rights issue.

Transportation equity: Basics

We work closely with PolicyLink as well as several other traditional civil and human rights groups and traditional transportation-access infrastructure organizations. But for us the issue is about access and affordability, and making sure that the investment includes those that we would argue have been traditionally left out of the decision-making process and have not really had the same type of access to transportation-related jobs, and then also actually being able to access the system. We're talking about people with low incomes, communities of color, people with disabilities, seniors, and many people in rural areas being able to afford transportation to access healthy food, healthcare, jobs, education, affordable housing. In terms of proportion of one's income, low-income communities not surprisingly spend a disproportionate amount of their annual incomes on transportation compared to middle-income Americans. Low-income Americans spend about 42% of their total annual incomes on transportation; where as the bulk of Americans, spend a little bit less, about 22%. So when you combine that with housing and perhaps healthcare costs or maybe educational costs, certainly lower-income individuals are eating up a larger percentage of their income just trying to get to and from work or to look for work or to access healthcare.

Representation in Transportation Policy

Traditionally we've argued or we found that transportation policy hasn't represented all constituents equally and that is because traditionally people of color, low-income people, people with disabilities, haven't had the type of

representation that we think would be a little bit more fair in local decision-making bodies such as Metropolitan Planning Organizations. And so part of what we like to do is sort of think through the strategic planning and who needs to be part of that so that if the decisions are being made that affect people of color, and people with disabilities, that they actually have a seat at the table when those decisions are made and when transportation policy is developed.

Why lack of dialogue?

I think we've assumed for far too long. And that's unfortunately why it's not really part of the day-to-day dialogue. I think two things; one: the average person does not necessarily connect the serious need or impact that transportation has on their actual access to healthcare and job opportunities and affordable housing. Especially those that don't necessarily feel the pinch as much in terms of the cost, so many people just assume that things are fine or well. Generally the members of the public don't necessarily talk about transportation as much because there are some that don't feel that they are as affected by the cuts in transportation just mainly because of their economic status or the fact that they are among the lucky that has access to and can afford their own vehicle or is close enough to public transportation that they can afford and get to where they need to go. But it's those individuals that can't afford or don't have the access, really need to be part of the debate and traditionally have not been.

So that's one point. And then the second point is on a national level we talk about reauthorization once every 5-6 years, and it's within that gap very often that the conversation on transportation infrastructure tends to be at the state and local level. So it's really kind of times like this, where we are now, that I think that there is a heightened attention to transportation reauthorization and how we spend the limited dollars that we have, or will be allocated. And also too, where we find ourselves with unemployment, overall unemployment is around 9% but particularly in the transportation industry, transportation construction, it's a little bit higher it's at 16% approximately. On a regular basis this sort of heightened sense of discussion around infrastructure and transportation may not take place. I think currently given the sort of confluence of events: the unemployment rate, the debt ceiling challenges, the upcoming elections, those among several reasons have contributed to greater discussion and attention towards transportation infrastructure.

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