

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Scott Huler, Author, *On the Grid*

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Scott Huler

On the Grid

I took my house in Raleigh, NC and followed every system that supports that house. I said where does the electricity come from? And how does it get there? And whose idea was that? And since when? And where does the water come from? And how does it get here? And how do they treat it? And how do they get it to my house? And what happens if one of the mains breaks? And what happens when I flush the toilet and all that bad stuff goes away and I never have to think about it for one second; and who pays for streets, and how wide are they, and what do they pave it with, and whose idea was that, and since when, and how often? On and on and on, system after system is part of this unbelievably complicated grid that for all intents and purposes never fails. How does this thing, that makes my life so easy, work?

The Necessity of Infrastructure in the Modern Age

I took as sort of my guiding quotation, the quote by the historian of science, James Burke, who said, regarding our infrastructure - “Never in history have so many known so little about so much.” And my feeling is that we, as you say, every time you hit the switch all the electrons in the world line up to run through your little tungsten wire to make your bulb glow or maybe now it’s a little curly thing, right? That glows on gas, but they want your lights to go on. And every time we turn that faucet, be it drought, be it flood, nice potable water comes out. That’s a thousand times out of a thousand, our local director of the water department likes to say: “When was the last time your cable went out?” And people raise their hands. And then he says, “Can you remember the last time your electricity went out?” And people raise their hands. “Can you remember the last time your water went out?” Everybody just looks at him. He says, “That’s what I want you to think about.” You know, I like to tell people the next time I’ve gone to get a drink of water out of my faucet, I did the math, something like a hundred and fifty thousand times in my life, and the next time I get waterborne illness will be the first. And that’s not just me, that’s me and everyone I’ve known in my entire life. This is an unimaginable miracle - even 50 years ago an unimaginable miracle, and we take it completely for granted. We don’t even just ignore it; we think that it happens naturally. We don’t think about it for one

second out of every month, and so yeah, I specifically went out to address that deficit, that awareness deficit.

The Public's Lack of Attention

It's one of those issues like healthcare and education, but if it's education it's still just "well, kids aren't getting educated" we're not really going to see the effects of that for 15 years, right? Before we look around and nobody knows how to do anything or know how to have a sensible conversation, or know how to understand the news that's pummeling them 24 hours a day. And with healthcare it's like "well, when people get old, maybe they can't get what they want. Well I'm ok still." But with infrastructure, it's tomorrow and it's everybody. If the water system goes wrong, it's not just old people, it's not just poor people, it's not just young people, it's everybody. So it's astonishing to me that people don't really understand that this stuff is so vital, and it plays a role in your life constantly.

Infrastructure Awareness

I went into this book wanting to say, "How do they do that? How does that happen?" My God, you start to realize, I'm like everybody else. I wake up in the morning when the alarm goes off and I whack the snooze bar to go back to sleep. That means before my eyes are even open, two of these enormously complex systems, the electrical system and the broadcast media have already supported me. Five minutes later, I'm in the bathroom, that's two more systems: fresh water and wastewater. All this stuff is going on all the time and I was just amazed at you know, nobody was paying attention to it, but the thing is, I just wanted to know how it worked. I went in here wanting to know how it worked. I keep telling people, I didn't want to be Al Gore, saying "if you don't screw in these curly light bulbs, then the day after tomorrow, whoosh, out comes the green or die sheet, and we all drown." And I didn't want to be Dick Cheney saying, "Shut up and keep driving" you know? I just wanted to understand, but once you start understanding, you can't fail to take a position, and my position was "we better get ready to start paying for this." Because when, the American Society of Civil Engineers gives us another distressing series of D minuses in our infrastructure the only thing we can do is fix it. And when you fix things, they cost money, and we are told they tell us, 2.2 trillion dollars in arrears. And so we have to start paying for it and how do you do that in, not this economy, the economy I don't think is the issue. But in this political climate, where we have an entire generation of people who believe to the core of their bones that you can have government services, but that taxes are inherently unjust? I have these conversations all the time and I asked someone, well so, "we'll do it without taxes." Tell me how? How are we going to do it without tax money? How are we going to pave our roads? How are we going to replace our aging sewage system? How are we going to replace and repair our water plants and develop new ones? How are we going to do these things without taxes?" And he said to me "well...you don't use tax

money for that, you use bonds issued." And once you're there, where somebody doesn't understand that a bond issue is just a way of paying taxes all at once, instead of over 30 years, I don't even know where to go with that; because, have you heard another answer to that question? That you found reasonable, that you found hopeful? That we were going to find a way to take care of all of these systems without paying for them?

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