

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Hon. Joseph P. Riley, Mayor of Charleston, South Carolina

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Mayor Riley

We are builders, and we need to build

In different parts of our society and in our country you have people recognizing the deficit that exists in infrastructure that hasn't been tended to; and the fact of the matter is that Americans at their core are builders. That's our country. One of the heritages our country gave the world – the new world -- was that we build. We built the country. We built the canals. We built the railroad, built the highways. We built the industrial engine for the Industrial Revolution. And I think there is an awakening that, in our spirit, we're doers. And we've got a huge deficit of infrastructure that exists in our country because we haven't been building like we should. And if you don't, if you're not always building, you fall behind. There is no status quo. The American spirit is the spirit of builders; that's what made our country great and we don't want other countries to surpass in being the places around the world where you go to see excellent public works and significant investments in infrastructure. We want that to be the United States of America.

Preventing disasters and taking initiative

We're really facing a crisis. I've said many times, the tragedy of Katrina was not the power of the hurricane; it was the failure of the infrastructure. It was the infrastructure that needed to be repaired and maintained and enhanced and it was left unaddressed. That's why the damage that Katrina did in New Orleans happened: because the levees weren't repaired. They weren't insured. You could understand the threat that you had if there were a serious hurricane and you didn't have them improved. We saw the bridge fall tragically in Minneapolis, and I think our country is ready for it. America wants to build. And I see it in my own community, the need for it. We applied for a TIGER grant for a very complicated highway project that was really the state / federal responsibility that wasn't happening and the city took the initiative. We put in an application for TIGER 1, worked it hard, got a \$10 million grant. It was a \$150 million project in total, but that \$10 million grant we matched it, and now we've found other money and we're getting the state working with us, and we're going to get the full \$154 million done.

Infrastructure and American Pride

What we're trying to do is activate the cord that is there in the American spirit to build and that we've got to start building again. We've got to build highways, and our bridges, and our bike paths, and our railroads, and our mass transit, and our airports -- it used to be our airports were the best in the world; now you go to other places to see the best airports -- and to deepen our harbors, which is something very important here in Charleston. Very important to the ability of our country to successfully increase exports, is to have our harbors deep enough to handle the post-Panama ships. And so I think what we're trying to do is to get Americans alerted to something that intuitively they understand -- this is a nation of builders, and if we don't address the infrastructure deficit, then the economic progress, and the social progress, that we want our country to make, isn't going to happen. You get into the politics of today, use the bromides of the deficit, or big government, or something like that, but you move that away for a minute and talk to people about getting that bridge made that the community needs, getting that mass transit constructed that the community needs, getting that harbor deepened, getting that airport, safe rides to school, bike pedestrian, civic buildings, public works that people get behind building. They always do. It's part of the American Spirit. So that's what we're trying to do: to get a movement going that we know from history, as well as our intuition, that is right. We all know Eisenhower challenged us to be able to drive across the continent, and President Kennedy said we're going to the moon. Those are prideful components of American history, and that's what we're trying to do: rekindle that spirit, and get the movement going.

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