

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Jarrett Walker, Author, *Human Transit – How Clearer Thinking about Public Transit Can Enrich Our Communities and Our Lives*

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Jarrett Walker

Transit Systems Should Work Together to Get People Where They're Going

If you're in the infrastructure business, there's a temptation to think of the infrastructure project as an end in itself. But obviously in transportation, infrastructure only makes sense if it fits into a network, and if it is part of a total system for optimizing people's mobility and access. So one of the things I'm very focused on is rational planning at the various levels where this needs to be done, to ensure that an infrastructure project is not just a sexy toy as it sometimes can turn out to be but it's actually going to work as an essential element of a system where lots of different pieces of public transport work together. We understand that on the roadside too, that roads networks are interconnected systems, but on the transit side it's easy for many people to lose track of that.

Transit Isn't Just for Peak Periods—It Needs to Be There All Day

If you define the problem as congestion and go about deploying transit purely because you think it will reduce congestion, then you're going to build a certain kind of transit system. It's going to be very peak-oriented, for example. You're not going to build the New York City subway; you're going to build Metro North. You're going to build things that are very much about the peak of the peak period, which is when congestion mostly occurs. In the city though, and in relatively dense areas that are increasingly spreading into the suburbs due to redevelopment, you need a completely different point of view, because there the way you really win over congestion is in the long-term. It's by making it easier for people to own fewer cars. And that is made possible by a whole suite of transportation outcomes, including a really good transit system. But it needs to be a transit system that's there all day, and it needs to be a transit system that's designed so it can run very frequently.

Making Maintenance Sexy

Politicians would prefer to say good news. I also think that in the particular experience of transit agencies and infrastructure related governments in general, there's a tendency to assume that it's hopeless to try to have a real conversation, a real informed conversation with the public, so there's a temptation to take on

the kind of providential attitude where we're your...it's almost parental...it's "we're providing for you, look at all these nice things we're doing for you, don't worry your little heads about the details." That obviously comes back to roost, and blows back on you then in a recession where what's most urgently needed is rational conversations with the public about what we can afford and about what funds we need to do things. I'm in Washington DC right now, and everybody in Washington DC is angry about the escalators in the subway system, which are breaking down all the time at extraordinary rates. The whole subway system was built at once in a couple of years in the 1970s, so of course it all breaks down at once, you know 30 or 40 years later when all of those pieces are reaching the end of their lives at the same time. That was an entirely predictable problem. There was no excuse for not budgeting for it. But everyone has this issue that maintenance isn't sexy, which is a fundamental reason why you're seeing this huge infrastructure crisis: we haven't found a way to make maintenance sexy, nor have we figured out how to engage the public in actually understanding the real choices.

Mobility Equals Freedom

But you know this is something that's starting to change very quickly. Transit agencies now, in the current recession for example, are starting to go to the public and say 'get onto our website and play with our budget. We've got a little tool, you can play with our budget yourself so that you can actually see what we can afford, and you can make your own suggestions in the context of our actual financial limitations about what should be cut or what our priorities should be.' I think that's pretty transformative. We tend often to lose battles because the negative impacts of an infrastructure project are simply more prominent than the benefits of it and much easier for people to understand. And part of that is that we're not describing sheer mobility; you know, we're not helping people see how they're going to get where they're going faster and how that will make them feel freer. I keep bringing back the word freedom here, how it gives them more freedom of choice and access to the resources of their city.

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