

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Hon. James Oberstar, former Chairman, House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee

Rekindling the Dialogue about Infrastructure is Critical for America's Future

The dialogue about infrastructure is not just about our rail system, our passenger rail: our inner-city transit systems, highways, our bridges, our airports, our waterways, the locks on the Mississippi/Ohio/Illinois river system, the ports of this country need upgrading. All of that discussion has been put on a shelf in a sense, because things were working so well. So, rekindling the dialogue about infrastructure is critical for America's future. The rest of the world isn't waiting for us to catch up to them. China has doubled the capacity of all of their Pacific ports, they had 167 miles of quality interstate freeway in 1986; today they have 13,000 miles. They'll have 52,000 of interstate quality freeway in less than a decade. They have high-speed rail, Beijing-Shanghai; they have Maglev in Shanghai to the airport, to downtown and even Taiwan has high-speed rail on a relatively small island! They're just eating our lunch in the world marketplace.

High Speed Rail Around the World

The point of referencing France with its high-speed rail, Spain, Italy, Germany, Japan, Taiwan, China and the U.K. is that countries of lesser population size, of lesser GDP are making the investments profiting from it. If it can be done there, we can do it here. Of course there are significant differences, of course there are serious differences in the way we make the investments and the governmental structures within which we work, but the point of showing that other governments, other societies, other economies are succeeding is that we too can do that. We did once; we had high-speed, inter-city passenger rail, high-speed for its time 100 miles an hour, that was really fast in the 1930s and it's faster than highway speed today. And that's really where you have to start; so the public is way ahead of the policymakers. Wherever I traveled as Chairman and as a member, if a town had had rail service, either a locomotive or a caboose, on the entry or exit from that community recalling and reclaiming their past, they're proud of that history, they love the romance of the railroads and it can be ours again. We just have to resolve to make the investments. The technology is within reach; the capability is there and we can work off the agreements with the freight rail system to accommodate passenger rail in the same corridor.

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