

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

James Corless

Citizen Engagement: Required

There's a lot of uncertainty in this era we're in, but the one thing I'm certain of is, we cannot actually allow citizens not to be engaged. I think the only way, if we want to talk about transformative change and reinvesting, but also reimagining our infrastructure to function more like the 21st century infrastructure that we need, we have to have the public engaged. We have to go beyond the traditional interest groups here in D.C. I think that's the problem we're in. I think it has become such a small community of folks in Washington who lobby on transportation; I think we've forgotten the 300,000,000+ people who have to rely on the system every day.

The Role of Citizens

Unfortunately our transportation system is so poor that you're spending most of your time either sitting in traffic or waiting for a bus. So we could do a lot better actually giving you more free time to engage in these civic issues. Now that said, while it may be difficult, and I've even talked to local elected officials who feel it's actually hard even as a local elected official to get their member of congress's attention, or be able to understand how to plug in or influence something as big as the federal transportation bill. What I'd really recommend is that people don't do it alone. Don't go it alone. That they actually understand that there are organizations where they live: at the neighborhood level, the city level, the regional level, the state level, who do a lot of the advocacy those citizens can plug into. It's hard unless you happen to be one of the folks who regularly communicate with your congressperson and that's always important. But there are fantastic organizations. In cities and states across the country that are grounded locally, understand the local issues, as we know all transportation - like politics is local, but they are connected.

While transportation will never compete in the top three of the average American voter's national priorities, I actually think when things can be taken away from people, transportation turns out to be a very important part of their basic life and how they understand America's economy to function.

High-Speed Rail Has People Talking

I think high-speed rail has run headlong into the political debate du jour, honestly the fiscal realities of where the country is at every level of government: federal, state, and local. But I happen to think that high-speed rail is one of the few issues, that actually while it certainly has ignited some opposition, it has ignited the hearts and minds of people. It is something that is distinctly different from the transportation system we have now. And while some people say we can't afford it, I actually think far more people say, "Wow that would be different." And they know other countries have it. So I actually think high-speed rail, while it's gone through obviously a very politically challenging period, and if we look at the budget it doesn't seem like it's very good news from the federal level, but I similarly get a lot of questions when I travel and speak to people. People really do want to know, "will we ever have it in our lifetime?" "Does the east coast make sense?" "Does California make sense?" I get a lot of questions about it.

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