

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Jonathan Nettler, AICP, Managing Editor, Planetizen**

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

### **Planetizen**

We've been around for coming on 12 years now at Planetizen and the theory behind the site is basically to connect, to provide information, an information resource, and to connect people from across the planning world. Which is not just urban planners, it's developers, it's landscape architects, it's architects, it's urban designers, it's people who can engage in a conversation from the level of the experienced professional all the way down to someone who's just trying to get up to speed and learn information about what urban planning is. We have a lot of resources, probably the most well known is our news section and our *Newswire*, which is a newsletter which we send out twice a week by email and which connects people to interesting stories everyday. We publish 10 stories each day and 5 each day on the weekend of documenting a real wide variety of perspectives on what's going on in planning, the issues confronting planners today.

### **Failing to Act**

I think there are a couple of elements at play perhaps in why our politicians are unwilling to tackle these issues, why it's not making the top of the news every night. I think one reason is that a lot of infrastructure is not seen; it's in between walls, it's underground, aside from maybe roads that people see problems with in their daily lives. Of course roads are the ones that are most likely to get addressed when you have public works departments investing money, because that's where people are going to be confronting these issues in a really urgent way. So I think one challenge is that, with infrastructure, is that it's unseen. It's something that, until there's a real crisis, when your water is coming out brown, or your electricity isn't working, people assume that the people that they've elected and the people they're paying their taxes to are handling these problems. I think the other issue is that, certainly today, it's incredibly difficult to marshal the resources to tackle these issues and to get the political will behind spending money. I think in most states and cities, certainly at the federal level, it takes agreement from across the political spectrum, which seems to be particularly difficult these days. Infrastructure projects have a long life to them, so the arguments about them tend to go on for quite some time while things slowly degrade. So I think it's hard for people in their day-to-day lives to keep track of what problems are happening, and what is being done, or not done, to address them.

### **Local Initiative**

These large-scale infrastructure projects, traditionally, have been funded at the federal level, and I think what cities across the country are realizing -- you see this in Los Angeles with the "Measure R" funding, which is entirely locally funding for transit improvements; you see this recently in Chicago just last week with Mayor Emmanuel's announcement that cities and localities are realizing that to tackle these urgent issues -- they're going to have to take matters into their own hands and really move beyond reliance on leadership and funding from the federal level because things just aren't getting done and these problems continue to get worse. So I think that's a real optimistic area because those are the things in your local communities where people can really see -- it's not abstract, it's there in front of them--they can see what their needs are, and hopefully it's better at crossing those ideological, political boundaries at the local level. And I think that's the way we're seeing infrastructure perhaps moving in the future.

### **California High Speed Rail**

What I think you're seeing is for the past year or more, that there have been vested interests from all across the spectrum, from the business and political spectrum, that have been fighting tooth and nail to stop this before it starts. From a personal level, I grew up on the East Coast. I lived in New York for the past 5 years before moving back to Los Angeles, and I recognize the value of being able to travel by means other than the automobile. I think being able to use trains, having driven back and forth between L.A. and San Francisco repeatedly, I can personally see how much value that can bring to the state, to the experience of traveling. I've seen various studies looking at what the cost to meet the growing population needs that are projected for the state, to upgrade our highways here, and I think the costs are comparable. This is something that was approved by the public, by public referendum. This is not something being rammed down the throats of Californians by a political elite, a business elite. This is something people have voted for, that they've said that they approve, so I think it makes sense for California. It may take us time to see the benefits of it, but again I think major investment in infrastructure can't wait for the federal government to come with the credit card. I think that states and local municipalities recognize that they need to embark on these things on their own.

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