

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Kate Slevin

New York: Leading the Way

It's the case when you work at various levels of government: at one level you might see some roadblocks but at another you might see some progress. And we've certainly seen progress in our region on a number of fronts. One thing we can point to is the changes in New York City. The Department of Transportation has really been a national leader in creating more walk-able and safer streets, and really designing streets that are catalysts for sustainable economic growth. They've added hundreds of miles of bike lanes, opened up public plazas, transformed the congested area of Broadway and Midtown into a wonderful public plaza. And the list goes on in terms of things that they're doing, and I think they serve as a real leader about how to get things done and how a government can do things that are affordable and relatively easy to implement even during an economic recession when federal funding isn't coming through as you'd want it to. That's one place we've had a lot of success at the state level in New York. We recently had a piece of legislation passed, that we strongly supported, which is Complete Streets legislation. And this legislation ensures that when roads are rebuilt or rehabilitated they'll be designed for all users, so they'll have accommodations for pedestrians and cyclists, along with motorists and transit users. So, you know, we have definitely seen some progress despite the roadblocks at the federal level.

Success on the Regional Level

I think it's very frustrating working on the federal level right now with the political divisiveness that's been occurring over the past couple years. And you know politics, I think, is driving a lot decisions that elected officials are making more than anything else and that certainly isn't good for transportation policies. But, you know, I have a much more optimistic outlook on things. In our region we're seeing more and more people riding transit, we're seeing more and more people riding bikes, we're seeing safer conditions for walking, we're seeing all levels of government looking at ways to make their roads safer for smart growth development to occur. Connecticut just launched a round of transit oriented development grants, which will help municipalities plan for increased development around train stations, so it'll be easier to live, and work, and hang out next to the train station. So you know I think if you're working on stuff at the

very local level and at the state level, there certainly are frustrations but you don't have to deal with some of the federal, political challenges that have been created over the past couple years.

Tappan Zee Bridge Project

We've been involved in that project for 10 or more years and it's a bridge that's just north of New York City and connects Westchester and Rockland counties. And there's been, as I said, a decade-long planning process about how to replace the bridge. And there was interest, when they replace the bridge, to also address growing population and pollution problems in the broader corridor that the bridge serves, that's the I-287 corridor and it's about a 30-mile corridor between Suffern and Port Chester in New York. So this planning process took some time, and a number of alternatives for how to replace the bridge, and accommodate the desires of the Hudson Valley residents who wanted public transportation, resulted in a selection in 2008 of an alternative that they were going to pursue, which was to rebuild it, build a new bridge, add a bus rapid transit system along the 30-mile corridor, and then later on if funding ever became available, add a rail line across the bridge.

We thought this was the right way to go. It seemed like a way to accommodate the near-term needs of public transit by building the bus rapid transit system, and then later on if the economic situation allowed, building a rail line.

So we were very frustrated in October, when Governor Cuomo ended that decade-long planning process, which had hundreds of meetings, thousands of residents spent time in these meetings and offered their input. He ended that project and launched a whole new project, which just included a bridge replacement and the public transit fell out completely. So it's hard to justify spending \$5 billion on a project right now that doesn't respond to the desires of local residents, doesn't respond to state goals of expanding public transportation and giving people transportation options, and doesn't respond to the state's own data, which essentially shows that without some sort of increased public transportation, congestion and pollution in the corridor is just going to get worse and grow as time goes on. And it's simply a tale of how not to pursue a transportation project by ignoring public comment, and ignoring data that's been created over 10 years and completely changing the scope of a project.

Increased Civic Engagement

If you ride public transit or drive, which most people do, transit service has seen cuts, throughout the country, fares have gone up, road conditions are getting worse in a lot of places, and it's affecting people in very real ways. And if you follow this stuff at all or even read the papers, you know that the amount of debt we're taking out to fund these projects is just going to fall on our kids and it's just not fair to them. So you've got to pay attention to this stuff so you don't saddle

the next generation with your debt. I'd rather not do that to my son and I suspect other people out there get interested in this issue for the same reason.

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