

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Geoffrey Anderson, President & CEO, Smart Growth America**

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

**Geoffrey Anderson:**

### **Mission and Strategies of Smart Growth America**

Smart Growth America was created about 10 years ago. We are an organization dedicated to making better communities so we want to help communities think about how they're growing and to make more neighborhoods where jobs, schools, housing, places of worship are closer together, more convenient, and enable people to meet their needs in a complete neighborhood. People tend to think of that as mainly a local issue of planning, and zoning, and development, and obviously a lot of that is the case, but I think people are also aware that there are federal programs, state programs that have a big influence on what is possible within communities.

So obviously we've had a transportation program at the federal level for 50 years, putting in a national interstate system, we've got water and sewer grants, we've got subsidies for homeownership, you know all these things end up affecting how communities are built and what kinds of housing and community choices are out there for people and transportation choices. Smart Growth America is really focused on those policies at the federal level, state level, local level, and helping people understand the consequences and really showing that there is a model out there that we have neglected for a long time. And that's creating complete neighborhoods where kids can walk to school, where it's easy to get around as an elderly person, whether you're driving or not driving, where there's a mix of housing types so that as your needs change throughout your life you can find an apartment above retail as a young kid out of college, you can find housing with a yard as a new parent and you can find places with amenities that have universal design and access to culture as an older person.

### **Infrastructure and Sustainability**

To imagine that the sort of outcomes that people care about on a daily basis, whether their neighborhoods are safe, whether they're convenient, whether the basic functions work as we expect when we turn on the water or you know try to get from one place to another; to think that those are unrelated to the sort of core elements that make up the community, that are the backbone or the skeleton of the community is obviously not the case. They're highly interrelated and what we build then ends up sort of shaping the options we have as we live in it.

## **Local Citizen Engagement**

It seems to me that we're going to have to be more democratic about these decisions, and that the public is sort of forcing that through its actions. So if you look, for instance, at the federal level trying to make the case for, and get support in Congress and other places for, larger infrastructure investments or even continuation of the past levels of investment in infrastructure, the public just isn't there. You don't hear this kind of outcry from the public in the way that you do among people who follow this, who know that we've been grossly under-investing in infrastructure. Whether you're talking about transportation, water & sewer, the electric grid, or other things that we are behind in terms of our rates of investment that we have reduced our investment in infrastructure compared to historical levels. You know, policy makers recognize that but citizens—you don't hear any clamor of concern from them. What you do see not at the national level, but once you get down to the regional and local level, is a lot of people voting to tax themselves at the local level, when it's really clear what projects are being proposed and what the benefits and outcomes from those projects are going to be. So every year since '98 for instance there have been ballot measures to vote for transit funding, and every year since '98, the majority of those have passed, where people in red districts and blue districts are voting to tax themselves for services that they can really understand and know what the impact is going to be locally. And I think that's what we're seeing. We're having trouble getting support for the kind of infrastructure investment we need because people have become disconnected from it.

## **Washington: Polarized and Disconnected**

Washington is obviously very polarized right now and that's something that the transportation bill and infrastructure in general have historically avoided. Infrastructure has traditionally not been a democrat or a republican issue and whether people are riding on buses or driving on roads or flushing toilets, those have not been democrat or republican. They have been a matter that both parties have agreed is essential for community quality of life and for our economy to function efficiently. That is changing. I think this current bill is a kind of test of that as to whether we can continue to agree around fundamental issues that are key for our futures, community prosperity and for our economic competitiveness internationally. I do think that there has been a lot of engagement around this bill. *Transportation for America*, one of Smart Growth America's projects, has engaged more than 500 organizations in talking to the Hill and trying to communicate what the public is looking for, but I think we're still not there yet. We had a House Bill that had proposed to eliminate the traditional source of funding for transit and replace it with a pretty shaky source that probably wouldn't last more than a couple of years. And when you survey the public, the public wants to see more investment in public transportation and thinks that it would be of benefit to the country and to their communities, and as we've seen at the local level,

they're willing to pay for it. So there's definitely a disconnect. I think the more that the public doesn't see the kind of accountability, doesn't see their interests being represented—it creates some disenchantment and I think disenchantment leads to disengagement.

### **Role of Citizen Engagement**

I think it's going to be very hard and not practicable for regular citizens to join in the really technical pieces of a debate about how to structure a particular program. But it's very possible to send an overall signal about the kinds of options people want. I think those options have been expressed very clearly at the local level, very clearly in polling, and that if you had sort of a random cross section of the citizenry at this point they'd be making more investments in public transportation. They would be making sure we took good care of the infrastructure we've already built. I mean anytime you talk to regular people, you know they're really clear that they want the things that have been built in their communities to be maintained because it affects their own personal property values and because they know it's actually a heck of a lot cheaper to keep it in good shape than to let it become degraded and then have to fix it later. So I think sending those broad signals about their priorities and then letting the more technical and policy folks figure out how to make that happen, that's what needs to happen. But you know there has to be that broad signal of intent and direction from the public about what they want and the kinds of choices they want to have in their communities.

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