

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Scott Paul, Executive Director, Alliance for American Manufacturing

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Scott Paul:

Infrastructure Concerns

We're a labor management partnership between some major US manufacturers and the steelworkers union, so our interest comes from supplying materials for infrastructure, which is obviously a market for our stakeholders –steel for bridges, the rebar, the concrete, etc. the building blocks of our country and of our infrastructure—so that's number one. Number two, our manufacturing base would greatly benefit from a more efficient infrastructure. It would make us globally competitive, and so we strongly believe that investing in our infrastructure returns dividends for American workers and American businesses by making us much more globally competitive. And I think the third angle is a little more intangible, but is important, and that is to make sure that the American people understand the connection between manufacturing infrastructure and security and how interwoven those are, and how many of our infrastructure projects got off the ground under the guise of national security—and they continue to perform that function, even though I think it's not well appreciated by everyone in the United States.

What Americans Want

I think the challenge is that the climate in Washington DC, the political climate, doesn't necessarily reflect the wishes, desires of the American people who certainly have a strong appreciation for the level of disrepair of our physical infrastructure, and are perfectly willing to invest some resources in that. I also don't know that the American people have an appreciation, unless they've necessarily traveled abroad and compared us to some other industrial democracies advanced around the world, how far behind we are in many regards in infrastructure, both in terms of energy and transportation and what-have-you. So it is a bit surprising, but it's also, I think, reflective of the kind of political stalemate and just the different conversation that occurs inside Washington DC than does elsewhere in the country.

Union & Union Members Are Infrastructure Advocates

There obviously is enlightened self-interest for union members, and those who are non-union who are involved in construction and making things that go into our infrastructure, but every union member is also a citizen. We drive on the same roads, we try to take the same planes, we go to the same train stations, and we

deal with the same energy grid, and it makes union members no different than anyone else. I think there is a deep frustration that we are shortchanging our future. You know the American Society for Civil Engineers gives the American infrastructure pretty much a failing grade - and grossly failing in couple of different areas - and these problems don't get easier to address or less expensive to address as time goes on; in fact, they get more difficult. And it seems like a no-brainer whether you're a union member or not that when borrowing costs are so low, when there is an abundance of workers available to do projects, it's the perfect time to do it. It seems like the absolute perfect time to do it. And so I often wonder what some politicians are thinking, but I do think it helps to have the labor movement actively engaged because it is a very strong force and can be very useful in making this argument, along with other stakeholders who are engaged. We often remind people that it's not only construction workers who benefit when infrastructure contracts go out and there's some investment, but it's also the people who are making these products—the structural steel, the glass, the energy transmission lines—who are able to be gainfully employed.

Tough Decisions

I think there are a couple of challenges. Obviously, in a world with so many distractions, it's easy to look away and not have to deal with the tough issues. But I think there's part of a culture, a political culture that has contributed to that as well, that is frankly not a very responsible political culture. It's *defer until tomorrow what you could do today even though it's a tough decision*. And infrastructure—you've got to pay for it. That means raising taxes, cutting spending, or doing some combination of both; or reallocating resources in some ways, and it can be a tough decision to do that. There are unfortunately way too many politicians who would rather take the easy way out than take the more difficult way out. I don't know anyone who generally says, *Yeah, I'm happy with my infrastructure; I'm happy with congestion on the freeways or the fact that my water system bursts pipes and it's more than a hundred years old, or that the energy transmission lines are unreliable and we've had blackouts in the past*.

And so I think that most Americans share that common complaint; I think there's some resignation that politics-as-usual in Washington doesn't work. And it's odd, because infrastructure is something that has not been partisan. It has not been partisan. I mean there's been support for investing from democrats and from republicans for a long time and it's only recently been dragged down into this partisan scrap fight, and I think that's really unfortunate. Sooner or later, when things get bad, like the Minnesota bridge collapse or what happened in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, people do rise up and they act and they demand that something be done. But those are often fleeting, after-the-act kind of activism that's much less effective than saying *Let's be smart here. Let's look at our future*

and let's do something that will help our kids down the road rather than saddling them with more cost as we try to fix these problems.

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