

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Graham T. Beck, Contributing Author, Next American City

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Graham T. Beck:

The Tappan Zee Bridge is a Microcosm

I think it's a really interesting representation of the larger picture, particularly because the Tappan Zee bridges – sorry for the bad pun – so many divides. Particularly, it's an urban and suburban bridge, it handles a huge amount of truck traffic, it has a whole broad array of political interests involved in the debate surrounding it, and I think it does make that "local infrastructure matters" case quite well. The people who have the most at stake are those people who live immediately on either side of it, but of course it affects the entire northeast of the US.

I can't offer a good explanation of why we're not willing to take on these major projects anymore. It seems unbelievably shortsighted to me, that we can't take on these projects that used to be civic monuments. They were the testament to the greatness of a country, or of a state, or of a city. Be they bridges, be they highways - at one point, these were it. And we seem to have forgotten that, somehow.

With the Tappan Zee Bridge, we are seeing something that other mega-infrastructure projects around the country are facing, and that is namely a very politicized debate surrounding infrastructure projects that brings real financial metrics into the equation. Not only cost, but also job creation, and at a moment where budgets – state and federal budgets – are very tight, I think it's becoming a very heated discussion.

The Cuomo Administration's Fast-Tracked Bridge Plan

Part of me believes that the Cuomo administration has seen this as a way to advance the governor's agenda as a kind of can-do progressive, a guy who cuts through the red tape and gets things done. And certainly that's good for someone who may have political ambitions; it also reinforces his credentials as a guy who can make work, who can do a lot with a little. So, we're seeing that kind of attitude brought to bear on a project that I think, most definitely fifteen years ago, was a project that everyone agreed needed mass transit. When we were looking at this with a little more money and state coffers, without quite as heated a debate surrounding infrastructure spending as we are at this particular moment – or not just infrastructure spending, but *any* state or federal spending at all – it was a no-brainer that we would have transit. But the governor made a series of choices to get the bridge done, to create jobs, to build a bridge that was transit

ready -- if transit was needed in the future – to make jobs, and that’s one particular calculation. I think a lot of people rightly disagree with it, but that was the governor’s calculation.

The Battle Over Budgets has Cut Down Our Infrastructure Dreams

Four years ago in November I was writing a piece that was looking at the President - what my editor asked me: was it going to be a new New Deal, were we going to have WPA-style projects, were we going to have work on that kind of scale to address the economic crisis that the country was in? And I think a lot of people were really looking at that, and a lot of people in the infrastructure world were looking at that, the possibility that that might be the case, that we might be rehabbing, rebuilding this country, and updating our rail system, and boosting transit the way we needed to. But, the kind of pros of governing got in the way, and a debate started around where that money should be spent, and whether we should spend as freely as infrastructure projects required. I guess that’s what happened. The battle over budgets has cut down our infrastructure dreams.

Taking Action Before Disaster

Certainly the I-35 bridge collapse in Minneapolis triggered a huge discussion about national infrastructure, and particularly the state of good repair with bridges, and that debate made its way to the Tappan Zee and raised a lot of concerns. As to whether we’re taking action on that, and whether we have the real political will to do something before something terrible happens, before we enter a period of perpetual gridlock, I’m not sure. I’ve been writing about infrastructure now for nearly a decade and I keep asking myself the same question every year. And I keep thinking, well, it’s gonna be soon, it’s gonna be soon. Take an organization like the MTA, which provides subway and bus service for something like eight and a half million people a day. I keep thinking to myself, well, there’s going to be a point where people stop using it if doesn’t arrive on time, if it continues to cost more, if people continue to pay more for less service. But people are very resilient. I think New Yorkers – and Americans – kind of pride themselves on this resilience. I do think that there’ll be a point where that isn’t the case, when the system truly, truly fails and I certainly hope that moment comes before something catastrophic.

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