

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Barry LePatner, Founder of SaveOurBridges.com, Author, *Too Big to Fall*

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Barry LePatner:

SaveOurBridges.com

The concept for Save Our Bridges arose as a result of the book I wrote *Too Big to Fall: America's Failing Infrastructure and the Way Forward*. The premise of the book was to highlight the perilous condition of America's infrastructure, most especially our roads and bridges, and how we face really dangerous conditions for the nation's failure to make investments in repairing our infrastructure over the last several decades. SaveOurBridges.com really is the effort to bring that message down to a grassroots level so that every American, every politician, every person who is in a transportation agency, every steward of our roads and bridges, can go onto this website, can put their zip code in and see the dangerous bridges that are capable of falling down at a moment's notice just like the I-35W did in Minneapolis on August 1, 2007. Just like we had the Mianus River Bridge in the 1980's fall in Connecticut, and just like we almost had the Sherman-Minton Bridge collapse last year on the border between Kentucky and Indiana.

Corrupt Politics & Misused Federal Infra Dollars

Politicians, generally at the state and local level, take federal funds allocated for infrastructure and do with it as they wish. So they use it largely--and I traced the facts in the book--for political interests: to serve campaign contributors and the like. Because putting this money into a bridge or on a failing road does not give them either a photo-op, nor generally get them large campaign contributions. Secondly, throughout our nation over the last several decades, there has been a lack of political will, and a political leadership, to recognize the importance of investment in infrastructure, even as politicians have acknowledged that every year that goes by without addressing the dire condition of our infrastructure, we're going to be paying much, much more in the future.

The Top Three Obstacles to Fixing Our Infrastructure

In the last few years there has been a recession unparalleled with anything we've had in the last seventy or eighty years. People are concerned about jobs, people are concerned about larger issues like the economy, Secondly, there has been a large, large, movement in Congress that has held up anything that's going to cause a greater hit to the deficit, or raising taxes. Third of all, the public itself has no ability to mobilize forces. We saw that in the aftermath of the I-35W collapse in

Minneapolis. There, the lack of 11 to 15 million dollars, where the politicians were told that's all it would cost to fix a bridge that could fall down in a moment's notice, they chose not to do it. The bridge collapsed, killed 13 people, injured another 145, and the perverse intent of it was that the federal government sent them 235 million dollars for a brand new bridge. And life went on. So without highlighting that there are 160 bridges just like the I-35 in every state, which makes it a major, major concern, without highlighting to the public that they are already in jeopardy, we're not going to get the public's attention focused on forcing our politicians to make these changes in priorities of funding.

How Infra Spending Comes Back to the Community

The money is there now, and I've been with enough politicians, I've been with enough lobbying groups and interest groups in Washington who agree with me; the money is there. The political will, and the leadership, to make this an important issue, and put this back on the national agenda, is not there. Take one example: As I travel around this country, if we attended to 2,000 of the 8,000 bridges that could fall down, which are located on the SaveOurBridges.com website, we would be spending money that would employ nearly 2 million out-of-work construction workers for the next 2 years. And doing so would put money back into communities, the workers would be in increasing demand for other products like concrete, and steel, and everything else that goes into these projects. Each community would have thousands of workers who would be off of unemployment, off of food stamps, paying their taxes on the income they make, which goes back to the government and allows a regeneration of that money into local bakeries, clothing stores, automobiles, etcetera.

Making Infra Funding a Priority

We just have to see where the politicians have decided to prioritize funding. Look, for much more than a decade – and almost two decades – we've been fighting wars that have been off the balance sheet. So we obviously have spent trillions of dollars of money that we had to send our armies overseas. We obviously have monies to put into retaining military in places like Japan, and Germany, and France, etcetera. We obviously are finding money for all sorts of other projects and programs everywhere. There's no doubt that we have the monies – 100 billion dollars or more – to begin to take steps to correct the imbalance of funding that has gone on for decades. Hopefully we're not going to need a series of tragedies to trigger that recognition. My role, I feel, is very simple: to just raise the awareness level so that we don't wait until tragedy occurs, and we start to do this in a less than under-the-gun type method.

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