

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Greg Cohen

Infra Progress Expectations

Well I think there are two problems. One is that people don't trust that the government will fix the problem, and that I think has come from a relatively low opinion of government. I think the transportation programs have become victim to this sort of distrust of government and that has to be turned around. The other thing is that the decline of the quality of life due to congestion and things like that happens at a pretty slow pace. So you know with the exception of the bridge collapse in Minnesota a couple years ago, there isn't usually something that happens that makes people really stop and think about it. They're just kind of unhappy with the situation they're in and they don't see like anything is going to get better, so I think there's some apathy.

Citizen Advocates Needed

The mandate for change and for investment is going to have to come outside the beltway. Having said that, having leadership like the president during the campaign talk about the importance of infrastructure, having Republicans join with the president, that really helps to get the conversation going. But it will not happen unless citizens are motivated by their local community organizations, and increasingly a lot of that can occur now over the web, because issues can spread much quicker through use of Twitter and other new means of communicating. But there's got to be a citizen's role, or we're not going to get out of this mess.

Highway vs. Rail

I think the highway advocates like my group and me, we recognize a role for public transit. I think over the last really 30 years or so, both the highway and the transit communities have become relatively comfortable with the idea of transit getting a small share of the Gas Tax for that purpose. And there's certainly a role for transit, particularly in areas where the densities make it a cost-effective investment. So I think that's kind of a false argument; there are people who feel like in order to really go beyond being pro-highway to being super pro-highway you should be against transit. And there are transit people who feel like you're not a true transit advocate until you hate highways, but I really think that represents a pretty fringe minority of the group, and most folks in the transportation community see both investments as important.

The Gas Tax

I think that the Gas Tax will continue for most drivers to be a good way, a relatively low-cost way, of collecting a user fee that approximates their use, and so that they basically pay a fair amount into the system. I do think that tax needs to be adjusted for fuel economy, so if we're getting 54 miles per gallon in 20 years, that the Gas Tax rates should adjust automatically to counteract that: it should double. I think the current system in which the Gas Tax has been held static at 18 cents for, I guess over 20 years now, has not been particularly helpful, and that there needs to be potentially multiple variables considered. Now the alternative would be to tax people per-mile driven, but so far that's been a tough political lift. The idea of having sort of a meter in your car that pays the tax to the IRS – I think that, besides the sense that it makes, the politics behind it are a little bit tougher than an adjustment or an index in the Gas Tax, which, by the way, is not easy either. So, you know, there are certainly flaws with the Gas Tax. For example, if you drive a purely electric vehicle, then you get away without paying anything, even though you do use the roads. But I think there are also possibly ways to create an alternative tax for alternative vehicles. Once there are enough of them that such a tax wouldn't discourage people from buying them. So I think that sort of the death of the Gas Tax, is kind of overhyped, and that we'll probably continue to use gasoline and diesel for many decades to come, and if we use less then the tax should just go up to reflect that.

Who Pays Now?

We've been benefiting from the investments that our parents and our grandparents put into the system, and we're not paying it forward as we should to future generations. I think that it's basically a "me first" issue, where basically the resistance to raising taxes is really a terrible thing to do when you consider, particularly folks like me with children, that you are not providing the high-quality system that our parents provided us. Look, if we want to compete in the world, we have to have trade; we have to be able to get goods to market. There has to be reliability in that system, and increasingly, that reliability is breaking down. So one of the great advantages that America had with the rest of the world was the ability for us to get materials to factory, and factory to market and farm to market, and to port. And we've squandered that over the last 20 years by not investing. What we're actually working on right now is a series of communication pieces that are designed to basically make it clear that we have the responsibility to the next generation to leave our economy, and our quality of life, for them in as good a condition, or better, than what our parents gave us.

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