

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Michael Oppenheimer:

Hurricane Sandy Changing our Thoughts on Infra

My general take is that infrastructure planning needs to take full account that not only is the risk of coastal storm surge and other damages in coastal storms already quite high in areas, but in addition, the risk is increasing in many areas due to the results of global warming, particularly higher sea levels. So we not only have a long way to go in adequately responding to the current risk, but at the same time while we're sitting there trying to figure out how to do that, the risk is getting worse.

Sound the Infra Alarm!

It's unfortunate that it takes events like this sometimes to interest both the general public and our political leaders in the fact that more attention needs to be paid to certain issues, but it seems to be a fact of life. So, now that the public is paying attention, it is a good idea to try to engage them. We do need to sound the alarm, because we have good information that the risk is worsening; so it would be derelict if people had such information not to make sure the public and policy makers know that.

Reducing Risk

There are ways to ameliorate the impact of storm surge, including hard structures like surge barriers, which are raised during storms, or soft structures like porous street gates, or enhanced wetlands, or a combination. But we're always going to be running behind the curve if the risk is getting worse, until we slow the way the risk is changing. The only way to do that is to reduce the emissions of the greenhouse gases. Furthermore, we need a really serious conversation about stopping the encouragement of settlement in these risk-laden areas, which is a very hard conversation to have because there are entrenched economic interests that are in favor of development everywhere, any time, at all costs. So there are several different conversations that need to be had here: one, about improving infrastructure and making it more resilient to the increasing risk; two, reducing the risk itself; three, moving infrastructure out of harm's way. It's an on-going, continuous responsibility that never goes away, and we ought to belly up to the bar and get it done: for ourselves, and for future generations.

Policy Changes not Just Rebuilding

When a storm comes the Federal Government pays to put everything back together again, and that's kind of a disincentive to start adopting the right policies at the local level; but there's nothing that's undoable, unmanageable, about this. Different places in this country do the job fairly well, and in different countries the will and the political savvy gets these things done. So we can do it. It's just that sometimes unfortunately, and I really mean this, unfortunately it takes being hit over the head several times before people and policy makers pay attention. Well, we just got hit on the head. I really don't think we should wait for the next one before we start acting.

No Silver Bullet, yet.

Some technical fixes can help with different parts of the problem. It can help with storm surge; yeah we can build barriers. It can help with reducing emissions; yes we have new energy sources evolving all the time, which can help reduce emissions. But, you can't expect a silver bullet. Different elements of different technologies come available at different times; you can't count on them happening when you need them. And so there are things that need to be done, which can't always wait for new technology. You just have to do with what you have today, and that's I think where we are today with this problem; we can't wait.

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