

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Margie Alt, Executive Director, Environment America

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Margie Alt

Infrastructure and the Environment

Well, infrastructure is about the basics of how we make our society work, and so if we're going to have clean air, and clean water, if people are going to have clean, and safe, and healthy ways to get around, we need clean and healthy, and safe, and green, infrastructure in place. So to give you one example is water infrastructure, which we've been very, very interested in, and concerned about, because right now literally billions of gallons of raw sewage flow into our nation's waterways, because we have aging sewage treatment plants and they get overwhelmed by really heavy rains. As we know, global warming is going to create more and more heavy rains, more and more frequently. So if we look at the impact we have now, which is tens of thousands of beach closings every year because of sewage overflows, and more people getting sick because of drinking water contaminations, and more fish killed in dead zones in our waterways, all of that is going to get worse if we don't improve our water infrastructure by improving the sewage treatment plants that we have all across the country.

Taking Responsibility

Whether you look at water systems, or transportation systems, if we don't improve the quality of our built environment, we're never going to be able to protect the quality of our natural environment. So, I gave you an example about water, but the same thing is true when it comes to how folks get around. If we don't give folks more choices about whether they want to walk, or bike, or ride cleaner cars, or best, get on public transportation, we're just going to keep creating the air pollution and global warming pollution that is ultimately going to doom us as a society, and as a planet. And so we need to be rebuilding infrastructure, and we need to be investing not only in the old infrastructure, but in a 21st century, 22nd century infrastructure, so that we can not only survive, but really thrive.

Stimulating Dialogue

Well, I think that when we get down to what these things mean for the quality of life, people do get pretty excited about them. So when we talk to folks about the quality of their drinking water, about whether we can clean up the Chesapeake Bay, about whether we can get electric cars on the road, I think people get pretty excited about those opportunities. From my perspective, and my experience,

what happens is infrastructure sounds like it's distant, like it doesn't have much to do with "me," but if we make a link between better transportation, and better air, fewer asthma attacks, less global warming, people get pretty excited about it. If we make the link between a better, upgraded, sewer system, and clean water to drink, and safe beaches to play on, and beautiful rivers and lakes to recreate on, people tend to get pretty excited. So I think it's critical that we're telling people what the end game is, not just what the process is for getting there.

Local vs. National

There is great work happening in cities and towns all across the country, at the state level, regionally, and frankly the federal government isn't doing a half bad job in certain cases as well. And one of the things we've been thinking a lot is how New Jersey and New York, and the rest of the East Coast rebuilt after the Sandy Superstorm, and that's going to have to be a partnership of the local communities along the Jersey shore, along with state of New Jersey, along with the states of the region, along with the federal government to make that happen. And I think it's a great example of where getting a 21st century infrastructure in place will make all the difference for the Jersey Shore, and our ability to go and hang out there in summers to come, safely and happily with our families.

Learning from Hurricane Sandy

We can't change what happened in Sandy. It was devastating for so many communities on the East Coast. I myself grew up in Long Beach, New York, and so much of Long Beach is not there anymore. Certainly the beaches aren't, the Boardwalk isn't, so I know what impact that had; and you can't make that go away. Is it going to be the turning point? I'm not sure, but I think anybody who lives on Long Beach, on Long Island, in the South Shore, Jersey, etc, can see that these things are happening. They're happening more frequently, and we need to live our lives differently. So I think it's our opportunity, as Environment New York and Environment New Jersey, and Environment America, to show people what we think can be done differently, what we think we can do about making our streets green streets so that we don't just rebuild with concrete, but we rebuild streets with permeable pavements that can capture that storm water, which will reduce the threat of flooding, and keep polluted runoff out of the beach water. We can rebuild the public transportation system that makes it more and more likely that people won't be in their cars, won't be creating more global warming pollution, but instead will move around more efficiently. I think we have the opportunity to educate folks about how we can build differently, and not only what benefits that would be for the environment, but what benefits that would be for our quality of life.

Environment America

Environment America is a federation of state organizations like Environment New Jersey, Environment Illinois, Environment California, and 29 state groups across

the country. We are about clean air, clean water, protecting special places in each one of the states, and across the nation. And really the way we do that is by getting people involved in these issues: Making sure that average citizens in each one of the states around the country have their voices heard in terms of how we best protect the environment.

www.InfrastructureUSA.org
212.414.9220
info@infrastructureusa.org