

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Moving Ahead with US High-Speed Rail

We're making really good progress in developing high-speed rail in the US. The latest announcement that Amtrak and California are going to work together in a joint procurement for true high-speed trains, and the related announcement by Amtrak that they're not going to try to expand the Acela fleet, that's another demonstration that we are really headed in the right direction, because that means the Northeast Corridor will now get the kind of trains that are needed to really make that place shine.

We Must!

This really is one of those issues of "can we afford to NOT do high-speed rail," because we are spending so much more than our competitors on travel that it's really having an impact on our economy. The only way to improve the ability of people to see each other and be productive together face to face more often is with high-speed rail. And it will at the same time dramatically reduce the cost of that travel. And we are at a point where the economy is changing very quickly, and we need to change the way we do business in order to meet these new challenges.

California

Well, California in 1990, they had a voter initiative that was a bunch of different things together, all wrapped in one. More highways, more transit, bike paths, there was a freight rail component, and there was a massive upgrade to Amtrak, that were all included in this one package. And so, they really transformed their transportation network, because the voters agreed to a ten-cent per gallon gas tax increase to pay for this stuff. And so, they have already led the way in demonstrating how to change a state that was purely designed around the automobile, and modified it now so that you can get just about anywhere in the state by public transit. And now they are leading the way in developing true high-speed rail.

The First US System

We need to build an operating segment that's at least 120 miles long, and we do have people though who experience this on a regular basis, because we have CEO's who are going to factories in China, and have just switched from getting a limo, to now they take high-speed rail out to their factories. So we've got those folks seeing what it's about, we've got people who are being tourists in Europe,

and China, and Japan, seeing what this is about. But you do need one in the States to prove the concept, just in the same way that the Pennsylvania Turnpike proved the concept for limited access highways in the thirties. And there are a couple of places you can do that: one is in the central valley in California, and that'll break ground this year; another is Philadelphia to New York, and there's some work underway on that right now; and then a third would be Dallas to Houston, and there's a Japanese company that's investing heavily in trying to figure out how to make Dallas to Houston work; and then the fourth is Chicago to Champaign, with a branch to Indianapolis, and then an approach the rest of the way on to St. Louis. So those are the four places that really make sense, and of course I'm most focused on Chicago - Champaign.

Voice of the People

Remember our system is based on people voting, and so a Congressman has to believe that he can get the votes he needs in order to move forward to a next term. And so he's going to do things that get him there. And there are two ways to influence that process: one is with contributions, having lobbyists, and influencing the process that way; the other way is to influence voters directly, and to get them to start saying "well, this important enough to me that I'm going to vote one way or another come the next election." And that's where the power really comes from, and that's why it's so important that individuals start getting more involved, and making it clear that this really is a critical part of our economy.

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