

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

The Urban Resurgence

There is so much infrastructure that we have not kept up with all around all of our cities, including the DC region. Our cities are going through a period of resurgence, where many people want to live in cities and in walk-able areas in the suburbs that have become more like cities and we are not building the sorts of facilities and engaging in the projects we need to accommodate that. People want to have more places to live, and we don't have enough of those; they want ways to get around and we don't have enough of those. In exurban regions many states are eagerly continuing to build the roads that they've built for generations, but when it comes to urban areas, where people are increasingly wanting to live instead of in the exurban areas, the regions and the cities and the nation are just not keeping up.

Citizen Engagement Needed

People should be a part of discussing what needs to happen in their own local communities and also on the national level and discussing both what funding there needs to be, and what types of projects we should build. We are building, to the extent that we are building things, often the wrong ones, and we need to refocus on building the right types of projects and then make sure that we have funding to do so. But it's very difficult to advocate for things on the federal level especially things as long term and complicated as an infrastructure project, or worse yet an infrastructure bill, where the bill doesn't even specify the projects. So funding comes about in some very vague way with hard to understand criteria. And state DOTs and local officials go through a long series of processes to decide what to do, which makes it complicated for people to engage when there are so many levels and so many steps, often over decades as well.

What Do People Want in Metro DC?

They want to see better transit in the DC metropolitan area. They want to see Washington Metro get its systems fixed, fix its track signals so that trains can operate automatically and that there don't have to be so many shutdowns. They would like to see the metro expanded if possible. They'd like to see streetcars and light rail come to many communities in the region. They'd like to see bicycle paths on street bike routes, cycle tracks, separated bike lanes, regular bike lanes, whatever infrastructure for bicycles is necessary to make it safe for people to ride around and be able to do so comfortably. They'd like to see people have more opportunities for housing as well, to live near their jobs, live in walk-able

neighborhoods, live near metro stations or live near other transit lines, live near high quality buses. They'd like to see the buses better, faster, more efficient, and more frequent. And they would like to see more retail come to walk-able neighborhoods or for less walk-able neighborhoods to become walk-able neighborhoods. They'd like to see those types of evolution happen more quickly and maybe without so much consternation.

Congestion

We've essentially learned over decades of highway building that building more roads doesn't really relieve congestion and people aren't willing to take the steps like pricing road capacity that really would be necessary to reduce congestion. People complain about congestion, but they don't want the answer to be anything that would cost more or inconvenience people at all. They just want to have lots and lots of space to drive, which is very understandable but not really feasible because there's no way we can continue to afford to expand highways without limits. And when we do it doesn't help the people who are already driving because new highways just add additional sprawl on the edge of the regions and they create new demand. So people should not simply think that congestion is the inevitable result of transportation choices but to some extent it's the inevitable result of the transportation dynamic that we have today, where the only solutions that are really serious enough on the table are solutions that won't actually relieve congestion. We have to significantly expand our transit systems and give people much stronger reasons to find transit a compelling alternative to driving. And that will help a lot of people who do take transit move much more quickly, and it will help the many people who are still driving also suffer from less congestion because many people will have started to use the transit network. We also have to look at more pricing, tolling, things like that in corridors that are congested, and be willing to move beyond the dynamic that we have today where it's only build more, or don't build. Neither of which will relieve congestion.

The Mission

I run the website Greater Greater Washington, which talks about the shape of communities and the transportation and planning that affects communities in the Washington, DC greater metropolitan area. We very much support walk-able neighborhoods, places where people can get around with a variety of modes including without having to use a private car. And having neighborhoods where people also can live near their jobs, walk to stores, have nice amenities like parks and good restaurants near them, and so forth. And infrastructure has a lot to do with that because you need good infrastructure to make that sort of neighborhood possible.

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