

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Joel Makower, Chairman & Executive Editor, GreenBiz Group

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Empowering Citizens

Obviously infrastructure needs are significant and it's not just roads and bridges, but there's a growing technology infrastructure in which just about everything has sensors and can emit data, and that engenders radical efficiency in ways we're just beginning to imagine. Buildings and energy systems and vehicle and transportation systems talk to one another via a smart intelligent infrastructure; and what gets to happen when you have all that data flowing in terms of being able to make things so much more efficient, while creating a whole new generation of products and services, that's incredibly exciting. We call that "Verge;" we've been doing a series of Verge conferences around the world looking at that convergence of technologies. And of course all of this requires and also facilitates engagement by just about everyone in ways that's new and empowering. We're seeing, obviously, the ways cities are changing by engaging citizens using technology. There are apps that allow people access to city government, to transit systems, to knowledge about their neighborhoods and we're just getting going. The consumer app layer is really in its infancy stage and we'll be seeing a lot more of that, and again a huge opportunity to create radical efficiency while bringing new opportunities to people who need them most.

Technology Causing Fundamental Shift

There is a huge learning curve on the part of citizens to understand that they are empowered, what the technology does bring. It's not simply about using social media to gossip, or get the daily deal. There's a significant opportunity to have a conversation with government, to make government more bottom up than it's been in a long time. And I think we're seeing that. We're seeing that when citizens get the opportunity and the technology that goes with it, they are responding. There are cities that are beginning to leverage those opportunities and just scratching the surface still. So there will be a learning curve, and yes it is generational. There is a millennial generation, the so-called digital natives, that get this, that understand that you don't need to own things, that access to things like automobiles or even hotel rooms, that access trumps the typical ownership model or the consumer model, that we can have things without necessarily owning them. We can engage with government in new ways. We don't really know where this is going yet, but what we do know is that the tools are emerging in ways that they haven't before. All of a sudden you have in the developing countries people who spent all day waiting at home for the water to come on, you know avoiding school or jobs or just not being able to go out of the house because the water was only on part of the day. And all of a sudden there's an app, a little SMS app on their regular non-smartphone that will tell them when the water is coming on. And by the way, just

because they say the water is coming on, that doesn't mean it reaches my house, so I can help identify breaks in the water system that the water company didn't know about. That's a significant achievement that improves lives, that allows people to have access to water, to be more productive in their lives by not waiting at home, to help the infrastructure change, improve along the way. So this isn't just about twitter and social media and smart apps that tell us where the next parking space is, these are really fundamental shifts that are taking place.

Federal Infrastructure Gridlock

Well it's frustrating, and clearly this would happen much faster if there were leadership or functioning government. But we see a lot of it at the state and local level, which is sometimes, not the right place for it to happen but we're seeing cities that are beginning to manage their transportation infrastructures, their regional transportation infrastructures. So I guess the remarkable thing is how much is happening, in spite of gridlock and lack of leadership and lack of funds. It's going to be a slower ramp; it's going to take longer to do this. What we don't know is what the downsides of neglect are going to be and how many bridges are going to fall or otherwise endanger people. I don't know the solution, but I am impressed with how the private sector working with citizens, working with local government, can overcome the deficit that the national government is showing from a leadership perspective.

About GreenBiz Group

GreenBiz Group is a 15-year-old media and events company focusing on corporate sustainability strategy, how companies are integrating sustainability thinking into their operations that aligns with business strategy, and that includes green technology and how clean tech and sustainable business are emerging to create a new generation of opportunities. So we have websites, events, research and a membership group of chief sustainability officers from billion dollar companies.

We are on the ascendency; business is very good. We are the leaders in a field that's quite up and coming and particularly this convergence of technologies that we call "verge." We are bringing together big companies and small companies, public sector, entrepreneurs and thought leaders in North America, in South America, in Europe. So we are seeing just an extraordinary opportunity. This may be the most exciting part of sustainability and clean technology, and some might even say technology because of the potential to transform how we live, work, play, shop and travel, but also the potential to address the other pressing concerns we have around climate change, around resource scarcity, around access to mobility, and housing and water and food security, and just so many of these things. It all comes together in this technology convergence where there are opportunities for business, opportunities for the market to do things that the policy makers can't or can't do very effectively.

www.InfrastructureUSA.org
212.414.9220
info@infrastructureusa.org