

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Paul Farmer, FAICP, Chief Executive Officer, the American Planning Association**

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

### **Citizen Engagement**

I think that the conversation that changed a bit a couple of years ago was the decision to try to heighten the awareness at the federal level, particularly with the new administration, to see if we couldn't make more progress on some of the infrastructure items. Around the country I think there's been a great deal of discussion and a great deal of success. Certainly bond measures that have provided for mass transit improvements have passed at very high numbers over the last 15 years, along with open space preservation measures. So I think those conversations have been going on perhaps more regionally and locally, but what I saw several years ago was a heightened interest in the national discussion.

### **The Funding Deficit**

The overall infrastructure needs continue to grow. There was a period of time when we were making a lot of infrastructure investments, where we were moving forward. Now in that area alone we have seen a great deal of backsliding and so there is a deficit being built up there. I think with the funding sources not keeping pace with both inflation and the need, we've seen sort of a deficit building. For example, with respect to water planners around the country I think they are doing a lot more with water issues than they were a decade ago. Every place has a water challenge: it's either too much, too little, or too polluted. But everybody around the country is dealing with it now so that perhaps is something that's a bit new, and it's new in part because of a lack of investment over the last several decades.

### **Dedicated to Education**

The American Planning Association is an educational organization and we service all sorts of planners: transportation planners, environmental planners, and local land-use planners. We have about 40,000 members in over 90 countries and they are both private and public sector planners. So, we take our educational mission very seriously and we have produced a lot of books, best-practice manuals, webinars, streaming media products and things of that nature. Our planners are found in all 50 states, in most counties and at most local levels.

### **Planners Today**

I think one of the challenges of being a planner, and this perhaps is shared with many other professions, is that as new things come along whether it's a geographic

information system or whether it's a new challenge such as climate change, not much falls away. So I know when I talk to planning educators they talk about constant decisions about what do you take out of the curriculum as you must add new things to the curriculum. I think that's the same thing for practicing planners, what to add and subtract and how to do everything you can to become more efficient. You mentioned the interest of your organization in civic engagement, and that is something that is absolutely core to good planning today. In the 50's & 60's it probably wasn't in the core competency of a good planner but today it absolutely is.

### **Sporadic Engagement Doesn't Work**

Citizen engagement and civic engagement has to be continuous. It can't be something that occurs only occasionally, or is episodic, because what you're doing is establishing credibility; you're creating a conversation. I like to say that plans are stories and planning is a conversation and you can't have that conversation just once or once a year and be affective. I mentioned the success of ballot measures for transit projects and open space preservation, and I would suggest that they have been successful because there have been ongoing conversations at the local level about needs and about projects. People have developed confidence that certain types of things will be carried out, should they vote to essentially tax themselves by passing measures that prove the sale of bonds for specialized projects. I think the challenge for our general-purpose government whether it's national, state or local is that it's so doggone complex that it's hard to establish that credibility and people feel that somehow that money is going to be wasted or somehow it's going to be spent to benefit other people, or it's going to be spent for things they don't agree with. So I think that's one of the reasons that I favor the conversation that can be as specific as possible. A conversation about protection of the water shed for example is more likely to be affective than a conversation about regionalism in a rather theoretical manner.

### **A Partisan Issue**

I like to say that planners need to be pragmatic visionaries if they are going to be successful. The vision by itself isn't enough and pragmatism by itself isn't enough. I think the pragmatic visioning we've seen in the past is what's needed today. The political environment is one where, for the first time in my several years of practice, infrastructure has become a partisan issue. Infrastructure has always been bipartisan. An awful lot of the major environmental programs in this country, some that funded a lot of environmental improvements, came from Richard Nixon, for example. So one of the challenges right now for a whole series of reasons is that infrastructure has become one of the many partisan issues.

### **Tomorrow's Planners**

I think there are a number of professions where young people can establish careers that deal with these infrastructure investments. In planning, landscape architecture, and civil engineering there are people collaborating on issues of low- impact development, so-

called soft infrastructure. We are taking people to the Netherlands next week on a professional study tour so people can look at some of the ways in which the Dutch perhaps change their own paradigms relative to infrastructure and hazard litigation kinds of things. So I think there are exciting possibilities out there in any of these design professions.

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