

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

The State of Seattle

There are a few interesting things going on. Our rail system is under construction right now. The first segment from downtown Seattle to the airport opened in 2009; we have another, much higher-ridership segment to the University of Washington that's going to open in 2016, and then the line will continue out into the suburbs around 2020 to 2023 to hit important destinations like Microsoft and some other ones. That's one issue. There's not a lot of argument and debate going on right now; that's just something that's underway that's important for the future of our region. Another thing going on is that, like many transit systems, our bus network is having financial problems. Our county's ability to tax itself to fund its bus service is limited by our state legislature, and currently if our legislature does nothing then we'll be looking at a 17% cut to bus service hours beginning, I believe, next year. That's something that a lot of transit advocates have been spending a lot of time on during our legislative session, and the authority to permanently fix that is currently attached to a bill in our house of representatives, which unfortunately is tied to a highway bill, which a lot of environmentalists don't like.

What Seattle Needs to Fix

I grew up on the East Coast so I might be biased on this, but I actually think from an infrastructure standpoint it rates very, very poorly. It's highly dependent on its freeways, which run right into the center of the city, unlike a lot of other cities in America. Its rail system is horribly underdeveloped and they're working as fast as they can to fix it, but obviously it just started; we just opened a line in 2009. It's way behind most other cities, even in the Pacific Northwest. The road network is deteriorating pretty quickly. I think it was national news when we had a bridge collapse over the Skagit River on Interstate 5. In general, we've been underfunding our road maintenance and our transit infrastructure for decades now, partly because of an initiative process that allows voters to express anti-tax sentiment without really forcing them to account for the damage to spending that it will do when you cut those taxes.

Get In Touch with Local Politicians

I think sometimes these arguments are very technical and I think people are turned off by technical discussions and are much more interested in right and wrong when it comes to political questions. I think there's also been a failure to effectively mobilize at the pressure points on a lot of these things. I think one of the more effective political organizations in our state is this initiative machine that cuts infrastructure taxes and therefore infrastructure spending, and I think that's been very much to the detriment of our state. I actually think it's pretty easy, once you get a few people to write letters to local politicians, to actually lead opinion on a lot of these issues because there's really

not that much comment that comes in to state legislators and city council members and so on, about ostensibly minor issues like zoning and bus routes and that kind of thing.

Vision and Promise: Seattle Transit Blog

I'm really interested in trying to live without a car and trying to have a well-designed urban area, the kind that I don't think Seattle is yet and living in that kind of environment, both for sort of aesthetic and personal preference reasons, but also because I think it's very important for the future of our planet to have sustainable modes of living. By running Seattle Transit Blog, I hope to really improve the discourse, to unify people who feel like me, to make us a political force, and to also apply a little refresher to agencies to do the right thing when they design transit routes of all kinds, and for when municipalities are zoned to have some sort of force acting against so-called NIMBYs who are not interested in any change to their neighborhoods or any further development.

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