

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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The Rebuilt Verrazano Bridge: Made in China

We first learned from a Chinese newspaper report how the NY Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) had let out a contract to replace the steel deck on the Verrazano Narrows Bridge for \$235 million with 30,000 tons of steel to a Chinese-owned steel manufacturer and also a Chinese-owned offshore fabricator.

The MTA project includes pre-fabricated decking for the Verrazano Bridge to be completed in China, which took away man-hours from manufacturing the steel; man-hours for fabricating the steel; and also man-hours for the ironworkers constructing the bridge. The MTA just gave no thought to going offshore to China.

There is no credible reason for not investing in American manufacturing for infrastructure materials and supply chain items. It is just unconscionable to send jobs overseas to Chinese-owned steel companies and fabricators.

Public policy has got to be heading in a better direction for American workers and industry. When we use federal dollars, there is a buy-American provision, but when it is not federal dollars—in this case of the Verrazano Bridge, it was toll dollars that were used—the MTA felt they could just go anywhere they wanted for an offshore contract, which should be of great concern to every single American.

Telling Decision-Makers: Buy American Infrastructure

We went public with how outraged we were on behalf of American manufacturing workers. It hit the newspapers and the airwaves. We contacted the New York governor's office, and the state politicians. Our International President Leo W. Gerard wrote MTA Chairman Tom Prendergast a letter, saying we want to sit down and talk.

After we started getting media coverage, the MTA agreed to meet with us. The executive director of the MTA, the executive director of the Port Authority, and some of Governor Cuomo's infrastructure team met together with the USW and a Washington representative of the Alliance of American Manufacturing (AAM).

We told the MTA how dismayed we were with awarding the rebuilding of the Verrazano Bridge to China steel. We told them we couldn't understand how they would use American workers dollars -- hard-earned taxpayers' dollars, even if they are tolls — and then send these dollars to China. We added that we didn't appreciate our orthotropic bridge deck design was a prototype engineered at nearby Lehigh University.

The MTA took the deck design technology over to China, saying there wasn't capacity, or capability in the U.S. steel manufacturing industry, nor in fabrication of structural steel in our country. We argued that was not the case. Our view is the MTA just didn't look deep enough to keep work in this country. The MTA did acknowledge they would prefer to keep the components and the manufacturing of the steel in the United States.

We also need to know in advance how many projects the state has coming down the line. We must make sure we protect the domestic steel industry we have, and build it for the future of our nation's infrastructure projects – not just for one bridge – but multiple bridges, transit for commerce, and all construction infrastructures. So that is the dialogue we had. We walked away cautiously optimistic, because they seemed to agree with what we said.

Invest in America

If we're going to be rebuilding America's infrastructure, whether bridges, trains, high-speed transit lines, or public schools, it is just the wrong policy direction to not invest in American manufacturing.

We can make everything in this country to repair a bridge. We can make everything needed in this country to repair a school. We can make everything in this country to build a rail car, or a locomotive, and put tracks down.

We can make this stuff, and when you invest in American manufacturing, we invest in the economy. We create jobs. It takes a tax burden off a lot of people for investment in our jobs future. When you measure bidding out a job like the Verrazano Bridge, they talk about life-cycle costing. How long will the bridge last with the value of the dollar? The life cycle and costing should be factored in.

We need to keep putting the money back into our neighborhoods, back into the U.S., so it can create more jobs. The life-cycle cost is not just about what the job cost, but what it adds to the overall economy in the United States.

We had the same issue with the Bay Bridge between Oakland and San Francisco in California. There were significant increased costs by delays and bad welds in the project that was awarded by the state transit authority to a Chinese steel company.

The government authorities who make the contract award decisions knew it was wrong, knew there was going to be public outrage when American manufacturing jobs and industry are at stake, but again and again it seems to continue to happen.

We want the American people to understand what's at stake here.

We need to build things in this country to have a successful economy, especially if we're going to use taxpayer and toll dollars to pay for it. If we're going to rebuild this country, we need to support the economy by using U.S. manufactured products in the supply chain.

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