

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Annise D. Parker, Mayor of Houston

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

President Obama's Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience

It is designed to advise the administration on how best to assist local communities in dealing with extreme weather and other climate impacts. Part of what the President intends to do with his Climate Action Plan is work to cut carbon pollution and prepare communities for the impacts of climate change that can't be avoided, and then to coordinate that with international efforts to address climate change. None of us knows today what the ultimate impact on our climate will be, but even the skeptics have to acknowledge that the global climate changes over time. Whether you acknowledge the impact of human beings or not, you have to acknowledge that global climate does change, and if it changes in a sufficient arc it can have devastating impacts on local communities. If you look at the United States and where the majority of the population resides, we are in coastal communities. There's a similar pattern worldwide, and the changes in sea level are extremely important to monitor. In terms of climate change, the fact that it's taken us so long to reach even the level of consensus that we have, means that we're farther and farther into global climate change, and the range of opportunities to make a difference are significantly narrowed. The challenge for the task force—and I'm also a representative on the C40—the challenge for us in all areas of dealing with climate change is that it's hard to draw a direct white line. Many of the potential solutions have the possibility of impacting economic growth and development. You can't reasonably tell an underdeveloped country that they have to make sacrifices to offset the tremendous economic growth that's going on in first-world countries, for example. How do you share the inevitable economic impact in some equitable fashion, in a world that isn't developing in an equitable manner?

Houston Leading in Infra Investment

We are gaining a reputation for the work we're doing in terms of sustainability, but before I talk about sustainability, I also want to point out that Houston has taken a leadership role in investment in infrastructure of different kinds. Just in my term as mayor, we have embarked on a complete overhaul of our water and sewer distribution system. We have added a drainage fee, and are in the second year of a 20-year planned design to completely overhaul the street and drainage system in the city of Houston. We're also working on the vertical infrastructure owned by the city. We have more than 100 buildings that we're engaged in a comprehensive renewal and replacement on. I'm passionate about infrastructure. I believe that cities have to execute on the fundamentals. We may compete on the more ephemeral items, but we have to execute on the fundamentals, and the most important fundamental is infrastructure. As the United States falls farther and farther behind in terms of our road and bridge

infrastructure, those areas that can put money into infrastructure will have a competitive advantage, and so we are pumping hundreds of millions of dollars into infrastructure in Houston. Now, that said, while we do that, we want to do it in a sustainable manner. Houston is known as the oil and gas capital of the world. We are becoming the energy capital of the world, with a significant presence of wind energy. In an effort to lead by example, the city of Houston proper, almost 50% of the energy we use is renewable. We are, I believe, the largest municipal purchaser of renewable energy in the United States, and we intend to maintain that lead. We have one of the fastest growing areas for LEED-certified buildings, with a very strong commitment on the part of the public sector, but also the private sector, in moving in that direction. Everything that the city renovates or builds new has to at least be LEED Silver. Our largest school district, Houston Independent School District, has made a similar commitment, so we're moving to a greener, more sustainable future. And it's not just in the built environment and the buildings: we are experimenting with wind turbines; we are aggressively converting to LED fixtures for our buildings, our traffic signals; we're doing everything we can, within reasonable economic limits, to have a greener, more sustainable future and reduce our carbon footprint here in the heart of oil and gas country.

Out of Sight=Out of Mind

A lot of the infrastructure we're talking about, no one sees. At least the roads, if you hit a pothole day after day you're going to complain about that pothole, but unless the toilets don't flush or the water comes out of your tap in an odd color—which does happen in a lot of places—you're not going to be aware of that. A well-run, well-functioning city is really transparent to the people who are in that city. If it's operating well, you really don't see it. The other problem is that these other types of big infrastructure work take years of planning and design and then construction. We have term limits in Houston, and I can serve as mayor a maximum of six years over three terms. A large-scale capital project you start on your first day, you might see it completed by the time you leave. Overall, our water-sewer rate system and the subsequent big infrastructure plan for water-sewer are passage of a drainage fee in Houston and our big infrastructure plan for street and drainage: I'm going to have, as mayor, all the pain and none of the pleasure of seeing these projects come to fruition. A lot of public officials aren't interested in spending their political capital in that way.

Awareness is the Answer

I absolutely believe that if you do the education, the American people will put money into these types of projects. We wouldn't have been able to do what we're doing in Houston without that. We passed our drainage fee in November of 2010, which is one of the most anti-incumbent, anti-government elections in recent memory. It was very much a "throw the bums out" attitude, but we had a very clear, consistent, deep discussion about the situation: this is what we're going to do, this is how much money we need, this is how we're going to spend the money, this is the accountability structure we're going to put in place to make sure we spend the money the way we say we're going to spend it. But you can't just spring it on people; you have to explain the need, build up credibility

with the public and you have to be able to clearly articulate what the benefits are going to be and the public will support it. We have created a little bit of a monster, politically, with the attitude that everything is about a cost-benefit analysis and “what’s in it for me?” We’ve created a consumer model of government, and there are places where that works, but when you’re talking about something like infrastructure and you’re building for 20 or 30 years into the future, you have to have a different type of conversation. It really is about the common good and how putting better infrastructure on the other side of town benefits me because it has an impact on the overall economy and the city of Houston, or the water quality that I receive will improve because I’m spending dollars someplace else. It’s all about communication and making the case, and for many of us we say, “It’s self evident. We need this, we need that,” but for a lot of people it is not, and it’s hard, slow work and it takes a lot of time and energy--but it is possible to do.

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