

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Updating Our Streets for the 21st Century

I think that the streets of most big cities in the United States have been frozen in time for 50 years. We've largely looked at our streets as conveyances for getting cars to move as quickly as possible from point A to point B. We've come a long way from where we were 50 years ago, and yet a lot of the design guidance for city streets is routed back in the 1950s and the 1960s. In order to create a world-class environment for people, you need to build streets that reflect 21st century needs and that are safe and that perform well and that are diverse and economically performing. That's really at the heart of the NACTO movement, the National Association of City Transportation Officials. The NACTO coalition is actually 30 cities: the 15 largest cities and also affiliate smaller cities. There is a national drive and appetite for a different way of building our streets, and the guide that we've just written, this new *Urban Street Design Guide*, comes out of an urge to update the traditional tools and day-to-day practices of transportation professionals, which really haven't been updated since the 1950s and that's an issue that cities, large and small, are wrestling with. To design streets that are pleasant to walk on or to ride a bike on is a really important strategy for cities across the country. As we've said here in New York, if you want to create a safer street, a good way to start is by building a bike lane.

We Need to See Change

The new *Urban Street Design Guide* that we've just published actually translates some of the tactical interventions we've made here in New York City into a new standard. It's able to show that it's possible to change the streets of a city in close to real time and it doesn't need to take a lot of money. For most cities, if you're going through the traditional construction program, it's a five-year process at best and it's millions and millions of dollars. I think that, to a large extent, has been one of the reasons why we haven't seen the kinds of transformative changes that are necessary to update our streets as we have in the past several years. New York City has shown, along with other cities in the country, that you can actually use paint and planters to change the use of street and to show the public what a street could look like. It's been extraordinarily important because I think it takes down the anxiety level for people who are looking at these changes, because if you're using temporary materials it's possible to put them back if it doesn't work. So this is a very innovative way to make the kinds of engineering changes that are being demanded at the local level without having to spend millions of dollars of capital funding to get there.

Cities Need to Be Innovators

I think that cities are the incubators of innovation these days, and that's where the action is. At a time when it's sort of frozen at the federal level and to a certain extent frozen at the state level, you're continuing to see innovation and progress done by cities, because cities actually have to deliver the goods. They're where the rubber meets the road. So looking at some of our most valuable assets a little differently, envisioning them a little differently, and being able to recognize the benefits of a full reconstruction in the shorter term is, I think, a really important path forward in an era where fighting for infrastructure investment is just getting increasingly difficult. In New York City you've seen that 64% of the public supports our bike lanes; you're seeing 70% support for our pedestrian plazas; 72% support for our bike share program. Clearly the people are ahead of some of the traditional press and the traditional politicians, and I think the popularity has not gone unnoticed by officials across the country.

Getting Real Results Fast

We've seen a lot of citizen engagement on the work that we've done in New York City, and all of the NACTO cities. You've got 18 of the largest cities in the country, and these transportation directors and commissioners are actually leading the way on the ground to a more sustainable built environment, and the public sees it. Instead of talking about it for years and years and having five-year modeling studies and planning studies, what these cities have been able to do is show, in real time, what changes can happen: what it means to have a complete street, what it means to have a neck-down, channelization—in fact, the public now has an entire new vocabulary that they didn't have before because a lot of times those transportation investments were so many years down the line that you actually had a whole new generation of elected officials by the time a project got to the finish line from where it started. I think the public gets frustrated by the fact that they actually don't see any change. They've largely given up hope, in some places, that anything actually could happen. Some of the strategies that we've outlined in the *Urban Street Design Guide* not only show how city streets can be world class and how you can make these kinds of changes, but it spans the divide between the vision and sort of wish list that an elected official might have, and the nitty-gritty that practitioners have to deal with on the ground, so I think the closer we can get to showing real-time benefits and a new vision of what the performance could be of your infrastructure--looking at our assets differently--you're going to see much more support for infrastructure investment moving forward.

Cities Working With Citizens

What we've been focusing on is making our transportation system work better for people, no matter how it is that they get around. We have to build in more choices for our citizens. We have to make it easier to walk, and safer to walk, and more enjoyable and attractive to walk. We have to provide choices for people to get around in healthy, affordable ways by having effective bus networks and bike networks, and we have to look at our assets, particularly our streets, as the valuable resources that they are. All of those kinds of changes, pushing for that investment, happen at the local level. Cities are

where you have that immediate interaction with the public, less so at the national level, less so at the state level, but cities are where it comes together. Citizens coming together and demanding these kinds of changes is very effective. Most of the programs that we have at New York City DOT are application-based programs, so communities come together, they ask for a neighborhood slow zone, they ask for a bike lane, they ask for a plaza, and I think that goes a long way to have a down payment on a civic democracy and a response of government that we are all striving for and looking to see.

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