

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Guest on the Infra Blog: Megan Owens, Executive Director, Transportation Riders United

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Lack of Transit is Hurting Detroit

It is a huge challenge for the people within the city of Detroit, because we've got a very small bus system in the city of Detroit that is underfunded and struggles to provide the basic service people need to get around. We also have a suburban bus system but it also has some funding limitations. So when fully a third of the people within the households of Detroit don't have access to a car, it makes it incredibly difficult for people who want to get job training, want to get jobs, want to work hard and support their families. If they physically can't get to the job opportunities, it does really create a drag on our entire economy, as well as, of course, causing huge distress for many individual families. It also is a challenge for the revitalization of Detroit. When you have a lot of young people who want to move to the city and want to invest in new start-ups or work hard for non-profits to help improve the city, it does become challenging if they can't afford a car and extremely high insurance rates; there isn't the public transportation system that they can rely on to get around. It really has become a drag on Detroit's economic revival. Thankfully, there's a growing recognition of the importance of investing in our transit system and our new mayor is a former transit director and is very dedicated to improving that system. We've got a new regional transit authority that's been developed to start bringing the city and suburban communities together to improve the transportation throughout the entire region, better connecting the city and the suburban jobs and job seekers. So we're making some small strides but unfortunately we're behind where a lot of communities are, and it's quite a challenge.

Hard Work Is Already Paying Off

We're very excited that we were able to convince the legislature to pass a regional transit authority back at the end of last year to finally enable the city and the suburbs to come together, have one agency in charge of coordinating transit through our entire system. That's a huge step forward. And then, really as an organization, Transportation Riders United has focused a lot on helping improve the understanding, even here in the Motor City, of the importance of a quality public transit system. A lot of people don't realize, but back in the 20s, 30s, 40s, Detroit had a very successful, actually the largest municipally run streetcar system in the country. Even a lot of those early auto workers at Detroit's auto plants back in the 30s and 40s rode the streetcar to their work at the auto plant and saved their brand new automobile for a Sunday drive. So we've been able, over the last decade or so, to help change public perception, even here in the Motor City, from this attitude of, "Hey, transit—who cares?" to an understanding that we do need more and better transit. It is a benefit for our economy and our community and our

environment. Now the question is less whether we need to improve transit, but how we need to improve transit. In fact, we just commissioned a recent poll and fully 87% of voters in the four-county area recognized that improving public transit was an important thing to do in our region. So we're very proud to have improved that understanding and that recognition of the value of a high quality transit system.

Making the Transit Dialogue Relatable

When a transportation system, or really any infrastructure system, is really working well, people aren't thinking about it. And that's sort of the goal, for it to be so automatic and innate and work so smoothly that people don't need to address it in their everyday lives. However, in very few places does it work quite that smoothly. So when you can really relate the transportation system to people's everyday lives, then you can really get it back out in the dialogue. Whether it's helping older people recognize that you want to be able to visit your kids and grandkids without getting on an airplane, or making sure that even if you can get where you need to go, can the teacher at your kids' school? Can the policeman who's going to help you in a crisis? Can your barista get where they need to go? How many peoples' lives are impacted by transportation? It does take a little bit more explanation or thinking or communication, but when people do pause to think about it, when it is explained in a way that they can understand, it is something that people care about and are willing to speak out for. In that same recent poll that we did, fully 67% of people said public transit is something that should be paid for with public dollars, with public tax-driven fees, and they're comfortable with that idea of investing in public transit and that's even here in the Motor City where we have such an anemic transit system. One of the challenges of any advocate or agency is to think about it not just as lines on a map or congestion points and things like that, but how it impacts peoples' lives. Then I think we can really engage people more effectively and communicate to our decision makers about how it's important.

Working to Improve Public Transit in Detroit

Transportation Riders United is a nonprofit group based in downtown Detroit that is focused on improving public transit in the greater Detroit area. We really see transportation investments as being essential for building our future, to make sure that we have transportation equity so that everyone can get where they need to go but also to improve quality of life and to restore urban vitality in the Detroit area. We work on advocating for improved bus service as well as working to break down the barriers to real rapid transit and making sure that the transportation investments that are made in this region are really smart ones that will help build our future.

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