

InfrastructureUSA

Guests on THE INFRA BLOG

Center for an Urban Future:

- **Jonathan Bowles, Executive Director**
- **Adam Forman, Research & Communications Associate and Author of *Caution Ahead: Overdue Investments for New York's Aging Infrastructure***

NYC Needs to Focus on Infrastructure

Forman: New York City's infrastructure is old. Whether it's our transportation infrastructure, our bridges and roads, utility infrastructure, our steam mains and gas mains, or our buildings: our hospitals, our schools, our public housing buildings, it's old and as a result much of it is in a state of disrepair and needs significant investment on to rehabilitate. I think out of the most critical areas, water mains are certainly one: 1000 miles of New York City's water mains are over 100 years old, and there are 400 water main breaks at least a year. There were 403 last year. Over 160 bridges are over a century old, and we're seeing 11% of the city's total are structurally deficient. We're not maximizing capacity in our subways because the signal system is old and that forces trains to move slower than they should with modern signals, and it also means that the MTA needs to replace these parts themselves because no manufacturers are making them anymore. I think there are so many areas where we can improve the functioning of our infrastructure and the safety if we were investing more intelligently.

Bowles: We're an organization that's been writing a lot and focusing attention on economic competitiveness for New York, and it's hard to think of an issue that is more fundamental to the city's future success than infrastructure. We're in an age right now when this is a talent-driven economy and New York's done a great job of attracting and retaining the most talented people. If there are problems with our infrastructure and people cannot move around easily, it makes it hard for the city to continue to compete. At the same time, we know that a lot of other global cities that New York is competing with are not standing still; they are investing and modernizing their infrastructure in a big way, and New York is really falling behind. We've always seen this as an important economic issue. It hasn't always been a major focus of what we've done, but we've been looking forward to a way to get into focus on infrastructure and what we saw was that after Superstorm Sandy in 2012, there was a real, important focus on some of the infrastructure challenges that were caused and exposed after the storm. We thought that there really needed to be a more comprehensive look at all the other infrastructure, things that did not get highlighted after Sandy, but that really are problem areas today.

Caution Ahead: The Center for an Urban Future's Latest Report on NYC Infrastructure

Bowles: We want to put this issue on the radar of Mayor de Blasio, Governor Cuomo, and the heads of other city agencies and authorities, that this is a key city issue, that there are significant unmet needs right now and that our hope is that these policy-makers understand the scope of the problem, understand that they need to develop real responses. That means, ideally, much more investment in infrastructure, a look at identifying new sources of revenue that could go to pay for infrastructure work in New York City, and also a refocus of our priorities to really have more of our infrastructure dollars go towards maintaining and repairing existing assets rather than just funding shiny new projects.

Forman: It was definitely inspired by Sandy, and we felt empowered by all the attention that was being suddenly paid to infrastructure. We think it's critical that politicians are finally making a priority of infrastructure investment. However, we were concerned that all the focus would go towards "storm-hardening" and we would miss a lot of assets that might be affected by Sandy, that might not have to do with resiliency but are also critical and can actually compromise our competitiveness and quality of life even more than the next storm. I don't want to diminish "spend more money," because that is really critical as well and not just spending more money but prioritizing rehabilitation over the next glamorous but not essential new project. I think politicians too often love the ribbon cuttings and the glowing press releases that come with new construction, but it's really our core assets that need to be rehabilitated. Prioritizing that is really important, but yes, bringing construction costs down and new, dedicated funding machines are also really important.

The Center for an Urban Future: Expanding Economic Opportunity

Bowles: We are an independent think tank in New York City that publishes studies that highlight some of the key opportunities and challenges facing New York with a real focus on growing New York's economy and expanding economic opportunity. We've been really good, over the years, at elevating issues onto the radar of policy makers, and so we've done studies—everything from the high-flying tech sector in New York to the role of public libraries as critical human capital institutions. We've looked at opportunities for economic growth such as the importance that immigrant entrepreneurs are playing in the economy, and the role of design companies and designers in our new creative economy. But then we've also looked at things like the importance of raising graduation rates at community colleges and improving workforce development programs.

www.InfrastructureUSA.org

212.414.9220

info@infrastructureusa.org