

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Marcia Hale, President, Building America's Future Educational Fund

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Infrastructure Week 2014

We started at a very small scale last year when we were just trying to bring attention to the subject of how many people in Washington and around the country care about infrastructure and we're trying to show how large the picture is, actually. Infrastructure, most people think of as transportation, which is highly important, but it is many other things. It's water, it's broadband, it's technology, it's the electric grid. And so what we're trying to do is sponsor a whole series of programs that week and be very fluid about it but highlight all the different types of infrastructure and what needs to be done to bring the country into the 21st century.

Why infra measures get stuck in Washington

A lot of it has to do with spending, obviously, and in the time frames that we've been dealing with lately, that's a huge issue in Washington. If you take this down to a local level or a state level almost all these projects get approved in referendum—something like 70, 80, 90% of the referendum on infrastructure projects gets done, people understand what they're getting for their investment. When you take it to a larger scale and it's Washington, and the past history of people criticizing large-scale projects, that's when things get stymied. It's more a debate about the money and investment, but what this country really needs is a vision, a long-term vision for what it needs to be able to compete and what that means on all various levels of infrastructure.

Infra investment could create high paying jobs right now

I have long said we are going to look back on this time period when jobs were so necessary and we needed so many of them and look at how cheap money is at the moment, because interest rates are so low. I think 10, 20, 15 years from now people are going to look back and think, "What were they thinking that they didn't go ahead and invest in the country when so many people needed jobs?" Infrastructure jobs are high paying, high-skilled jobs. It is completely crazy we haven't used this huge need in the country to improve its infrastructure--to not only do that but to provide good paying jobs.

Cities and states are taking Infra into their own hands

There's so much innovation taking place on the city and state level, and I think that's because people who need to get things done and do things for the citizens are so frustrated with Washington that they—they haven't given up but they've come close to it, and they're trying to find ways to implement these types of projects on their own. Now there is a huge role for private investment, but that's only a slice. Private investment could help, and there are some very innovative programs around the country. I think that one of the very best is the West Coast Infrastructure Exchange, which is the states of California, Oregon and Washington coming together to assess their infrastructure needs, and then once they've done that, to find some very good projects and then help find the financing for those projects. There are many cities that are doing a lot of creative things.

We can't get anything done without a vision

To move it forward in a comprehensive way, I think we really need our leaders to have a vision of where the country should go. And in various facets we do have that, but there are three things that could really help: one is reauthorize the transportation bill and to shore up the Highway Trust Fund. On another level we could create a national infrastructure bank much like some of the states have around the country, which help greatly with the financing and funding and bringing in the private sector on some of these. And we could really begin to take a strong look at what technology means in this area. It's much underrated, but there are some really creative things happening out there. So what does an individual need to do? An individual needs to let their state legislator, their governor, and their member of congress know that it's important to them. I do think that it's going to become really, really apparent in the next 3, 4, 5 years, if we don't make great progress, that we're falling behind the rest of the world.

We'd care more about infrastructure if we knew what we were missing

I think we visually need to show people, both through technology, but also through some visual help. Show people what JFK looks like as opposed to some of the brilliant new airports in Europe, and what high-speed rail looks like in many countries around the world and we don't have one single line of high-speed rail. Now we are not proponents of it everywhere but where it works in the United States, we should have high-speed rail. I think what it's going to take is that kind of visual storytelling for people to say, "Wait a minute, why aren't we still the best in the world in infrastructure?" We're now number 16 in the world. And we can't build a growing competitive economy without having some of the best infrastructure; it just won't happen.

**www.InfrastructureUSA.org
212.414.9220
info@infrastructureusa.org**