

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Lynn Richards, President & CEO, Congress for the New Urbanism
Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

Smart Infra Investment Improves Communities

A smart approach that any community wants to take is first invest in the infrastructure that you already have. For example, if you are a homeowner and your roof starts to leak, you don't throw out your entire home just because the roof is leaky; you fix your roof. So when we're talking about schools, for example, if a school needs repairs you just don't shut it down and build a new school; you begin to repair your infrastructure. The same can be said for your water infrastructure: you don't walk away from that, you repair it. You repair your streets and roads before you begin building new. That's just sound fiscal economic policy. But population is growing. The U.S. is anticipated to grow by another 100 million by 2050. So there will be a need for new transit infrastructure. There will be a need for new streets and roads. There will be a need for new schools. The question is how can we make those investments in a way that meet multiple objectives. In my mind the era of single-objective spending is over. As a country we no longer have the resources to invest in just one objective, to build a new road. We need to invest in our infrastructure in a way that will help make multiple community roads. So, I'm a local government and I have a failing storm water system. Maybe I spend money replacing pipes. Well, how about I replace pipes and do the infrastructure upgrades in an area that needs revitalization, for example? If I need to repair a road, how about I begin repairing the road in neighborhoods that need increased investment? In that way we can use our infrastructure investment as a way of revitalizing cities and to bringing people back into the cities and to create, frankly, thriving economies.

Showing the Public What's at Stake

It is difficult to generate political support around infrastructure investments when people don't see the value of that investment. For example, a water-main pipe bursts. This pipe could be 100 years old, and generally they have a lifespan between 50 and 60 years. The water line bursts, and it's at that moment that people understand that there is a problem. If you begin to move your water infrastructure up to the street level using a range of green infrastructure practices—this goes back to the multiple objective spending—you're not only providing a storm-water infrastructure upgrade, you're investing in existing communities, but you're also creating a constituency for that piece of infrastructure. Roads have potholes filled all the time. You have a pothole hotline. "Oh my gosh, there's a pothole here. We need to go and fix it." It's the same way you create street-level water infrastructure, storm-water infrastructure; you begin to create a constituency. Certainly at some level the question becomes, "How do you create a constituency for that?" When bridges collapse, you have a constituency around that, like "we need to start investing in our bridge infrastructure." The American Recovery Act of 2009 occurred right after the Twin Cities bridge came down, and there was support for that. So the idea to generate political will, I think, happens at three levels: it certainly happens at the federal and state level, but it also happens at the local level. I think that

there's an incredible role for groups like CNU to do the education around the importance of smart infrastructure investments.

Getting People Involved in the Planning Process

I think that, in large part, we have many of the issues today because citizens haven't been involved at the table. CNU has pioneered the use of the charrette, which has become one of the most effective tools in getting citizen buy-in and true participation throughout the planning and development process. The problem that many communities are facing is when you talk about public participation it's that you've got to go Tuesday night between 9:00 and midnight, and you have 3 minutes to essentially say what your input is. We need a more dynamic process. We need to enable the use of technologies where the single mother, after her child is in bed, can log online and opine on how she feels about the development that's coming. And we need to enable the millennials to talk about how their community is changing. So public participation absolutely is critical because if we're talking about building places for people, and if the people can't talk about—or give an opinion about—where and how they want to live then what are we doing? We should just close up shop and go home.

Congress for the New Urbanism

The mission of CNU is to help build more great places. When you strip away everything else, we're interested in designing and building places people love: places that are walkable, livable, where people thrive and economies prosper. So the key piece to getting there is what is the fundamental skeleton of a great place, and that's when you're looking at infrastructure. So the fundamental skeleton of many of these places is the street and road network, which is a major piece of infrastructure. It's also the water and sewer network. It's also the civic infrastructure of where you're placing your school, your public libraries, and your civic buildings. So if CNU is about creating great places, where and how the infrastructure interfaces with that is everything. One of CNU's oldest projects has been the re-writing of the HOPE VI standards for public housing projects. This was in the late '90s. We impacted over 600 housing projects across the United States to ensure that public housing was designed in a way to enable people to live prosperous, thriving lives; to enable them to walk to the places where they need to work, shop, live, play, etc. Those are the design guidelines that we worked on. I think that New Urbanism has been given a bad rap in that we do have this reputation of designing resort communities, but increasingly our members are working to revitalize a range of communities. Think of Lancaster Boulevard in Lancaster, California, which was done by two New Urbanist members, to transform a six-block area of Main Street in this town that's about sixty miles northeast of Los Angeles. The city invested \$11 million in these streetscape improvements, entirely transformed the area, and that \$11 million in streetscape improvements attracted more than \$300 million in private investment. These are the areas in which our members are engaging.

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