

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Aaron M. Renn, Urban Affairs Analyst and Founder of The Urbanophile

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Pinpointing the Problems With America's Infrastructure

We see a lot of these studies that come out talking about the infrastructure deficit. Many of them are promulgated by people with a stake in increased infrastructure spending, so I think we can see some of that as biased, although I will say both Democrats and Republicans seem to believe in more infrastructure spending at the federal level; at least they talk about it as being a desirable thing. I think, unlike many programs, there's sort of a consensus around the utility of infrastructure investment. The public seems to like it in the abstract, but isn't necessarily willing to fund it at this point in time. I think a lot of people are in a lot of financial stress because of the economy. I think we really have to pick it apart and think about what we're talking about when we think about infrastructure. For example, I would say American airports clearly do not measure up to the rest of the world, although we've seen quite a number of improved terminals in the United States. I live in Indianapolis, and the Indianapolis Airport routinely wins third-party awards as the best airport in the United States, and it's a brand new, post-9/11 terminal that meets international standards as a humane environment. But I think there is a tremendous amount of upgrades to terminal infrastructure that need to be done. New York City, for example, has rather dreary airports. I think we're clearly behind in airport terminal infrastructure. We're behind in runway capacity in many cases. Our air traffic control system needs to be updated. There's clearly a need there. I think that we will continue to hear about water and sewer infrastructure problems. A lot of our infrastructure is very old, wooden water pipes in many places. With this it's again, like airports, a matter of will. We have the funding streams in place, should we be willing to price these things rationally? Although candidly I believe that incredibly expensive sewer projects that are being done to eliminate combined sewer overflows, basically imposed by the EPA, are generally speaking not a wise investment for our country. I think we're devastating the economic competitiveness of some of our urban core cities by imposing huge sewer bills that are not being imposed on anyone else. We see every city spending billions on this while they can't even fill potholes. I think it's really kind of a whacked priority in the grand scheme of things. So I think that's one where frankly we're spending way too much on infrastructure.

Failing Infrastructure: Is That What We Want?

Fundamentally, we have to take a hard look in the mirror and realize that, to some extent, the systems that we have in place in America are a reflection of the values of the people who live here. That's a difficult message nobody wants to deliver. Everybody wants to blame Washington politics. Everybody wants to blame some sort of external parasite or corrupt person as a reason, you know, X, Y, or Z has occurred. I live in Indianapolis; the street infrastructure here is horrible, and you know what? That's what the people who live here want. Ultimately, at the end of the day, it is a reflection of their values because they are unwilling to back spending the money that would fix it. They would rather live with this very low-grade infrastructure. The public needs to take a look in the mirror and say this is what we've chosen as a society. I think, to some extent, it's not necessarily a lack of public engagement. I think the system we have is exactly what the people in America want.

Things Aren't as Bad as They Look in the "Report Card"

If you look at the bridge ratings, often what we find is many of them are classified as bad because they are functionally obsolete, not because they are in some sense in danger of falling down. In many cases bridges that are even rated as structurally below where they should be are still quite safe. The reality is the I-35 bridge collapse in Minneapolis was not a maintenance issue. The bridge had been maintained. It was a design flaw; the NTSB concluded that was a design flaw. So, in other words, the civil engineers themselves caused that bridge to collapse. The civil engineers are the ones who designed all these fracture-critical bridges back in the day, so maybe they should step up and put their own hand up and take some accountability for the state of that infrastructure. Having said that, clearly we have a tremendous number of bridges, like the Tappan Zee Bridge in New York, that are end-of-life because they have been around for 50, 100 years, however long, and they do need to be replaced. I believe we do need to upgrade bridges as appropriate. I think, in many cases, they don't have the right shoulder width, lane width, but I believe the American Society of Civil Engineers is exaggerating the scope of the problem.

Negative Citizen Engagement Hurts Projects

I have more of a specialized audience who tends to be fairly pro-infrastructure, certainly pro-transit, bicycle, pedestrian, less pro-highway. I tend typically to be anti-highway. I would describe a lot of my readers as kind of motivated activists that may be a little different from your average. Frankly, what I've seen in general from public involvement is the public gets engaged when there's a project they don't like, typically in their own neighborhood. And generally public engagement means NIMBY engagement and people who are opposing projects. I may in fact argue we suffer from an excessive amount of public input and review that has dramatically raised the cost and timeline to do anything. I think we need public input and engagement, but we basically have created an endless stream of potential vetoes and litigation points in the process that are really being exploited by motivated minorities to go against things, to try to derail things they don't like, some for personal reasons, others for ideological reasons.

Sustainable Urban Success In The 21st Century

I am a writer about urban policy. I have a website called The Urbanophile. I also write for other people. I own a small urban data analytics company called Telestrian as well. I do some speaking and consulting, and I come from a management consulting background, but really I'm on a mission to try to help America's urban region find real sustainable success in the 21st century. By that I mean economic and demographic success, not just environmental sustainability. I try to focus a lot on cities that don't necessarily get a lot of love, analysis, or attention from major media sites, urbanist organizations; especially the overlooked cities of the Midwestern heartland, post-industrial America. How can we create an inclusive and enduring economic success in these places?

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