

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Erik Steavens, Rail Division Director, Texas Department of Transportation  
Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

### **TXDOT Rail Division: Facilitating Progress**

We've got things moving forward and advancing in passenger service as well as in freight movement. We are currently working with a private-sector operator, potential operator, that is funding the environmental process to look at high-speed rail from Dallas to Houston. So we're working with them to facilitate, being the lead state agency, and helping them with the environmental process from a technical perspective, working with the federal government, working with local communities, and then helping facilitate public involvement. We're playing that role as facilitator there. We are starting on the freight side to look for projects that there is some potential for that dialogue. We are going to be starting this fall an environmental analysis on the Neches River Bridge area in Galveston where currently there are three class-one railroads that are using one bridge, and it's a bottleneck, not just in Texas, but nationally. So we're going to evaluate: is there an ability to add additional capacity, work with those railroads to find an institutional and governance structure that would allow the construction and operation of maybe a second bridge that would provide additional capacity here in Texas, and nationally, for freight movement.

### **Texas Has the Potential to Make High-Speed Rail Work**

High-speed rail is something that is new and challenging anywhere in the United States. I think for Texas it is something that we see as a possible game changer. It is something that we are moving very aggressively to advance, and again understanding what is the role of government. In our view of these things, these are going to be investor driven concerns, and so what role can we play to help facilitate those investor-driven concerns? That's the environmental process, working through permitting, and facilitating discussions with federal agencies. I think those avenues where we're working will help make high-speed rail more viable. At the end of the day these have to be private-sector, investor-driven opportunities that have the type of revenue and ridership opportunities that would allow them to run as a for-profit business. Certainly we have been blessed with corridors in Texas that have the potential for the ridership and revenue growth that could sustain a high-speed rail operation. That's something that there are very few places in the country that could make those claims. So we are optimistic. We are hopeful that we can help facilitate a project that could be a true game changer for Texas.

### **The Future of Public Transportation in Texas**

Texas is one of the larger states in the country, and we have some of the larger urban areas, and they have evolving transit systems that are providing more and more capacity and use for citizens. Texas is also getting younger as we're gaining more population, and the millennial generation is one that is looking for ways not to own a car, and that provides opportunities and challenges for our urban areas to provide transportation options for the millennials and making sure that we meet their transportation needs. From a transportation standpoint and a public transportation standpoint, we have the largest light rail system in the country in the Dallas area. We have a developing light rail system in Houston. We have a very successful, what I would call a kind of new-start commuter rail system, one of the modern ones in the country, in Denton County. So you see that where transit is being developed and using some of the more modern

approaches to public transportation, using BRTs, providing amenities on some of the transit systems so that they can attract choice riders are things that a lot of our agencies are striving for, so you know transit is an evolving mode in the state and will continue to be as our demographics change. And just the sheer volume of people that are coming to our urban areas will drive some of that growth as well.

### **Public Engagement Promotes Informed Decisions**

If the issue is how do we get more people engaged in transportation and provide the funding for infrastructure, that certainly is a challenge that every agency is looking at. We have a very large communications group. We have a group that is working on public involvement and outreach. We are embracing, where we can, new technologies that allow us to do virtual meetings and provide social media updates trying to get at the different markets, because there is not a one-size-fits-all approach that you can take to engage the public. There are different age groups that have different ways of looking at things. There are different contexts to which you provide information. It's all vital and part of what is now how projects are developed, and it's something that will continue to evolve and be more of an emphasis of transportation agencies as we move forward, because at the end of the day making decisions about infrastructure is our job: helping to help people make informed decisions. So the more information they have the better they can make those informed decisions about infrastructure. It's very hard to predict what will be the issues of the day, what will be the things that carry forth throughout a political dialogue or a public dialogue. Transportation and infrastructure is kind of an expectation. It's something that people assume is going to be there, and is assumed to be put in place. It is not a kind of a yearly thing. And so there are other topics that tend to resonate and become more paycheck or back issues. When you pay your property tax you see pretty clearly about school boards and local government financing, and so there's a lot of different elements that speak to you on a daily basis in those other areas, but not a lot of dialogue happens with infrastructure unless there's some sort of failure related to some incident: a bridge that falls down in Minnesota, or a rail derailment in Canada that sparks some debate about everything. So it seems to be that the dialogue around infrastructure tends to be more reactionary than it is proactive. But, again, that happens with every issue; it's just there are more people who tend to look at those personal, day-to-day decisions related to education and other issues that come up. But that's why it's great to have associations and industry magazines and publications that are out there being advocates that help the folks that are really trying to advance infrastructure.

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