

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Robyn Boerstling, Director, Transportation & Infrastructure Policy, National Association of Manufacturers (NAM)**

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

### **Why Infrastructure Matters to the National Association of Manufacturers**

We are the largest industrial trade association in the United States. We represent the 12 million men and women who make things here, and transportation is a top issue. I would put it in a category of economic leadership, and I would say over the past few years we really worked towards better quantifying the importance of this issue from our members, and we were hearing a lot when I first came on board about the importance of investing in infrastructure. This is a global competitiveness issue, and we were collecting lots of anecdotes and different impacts from our membership on the importance of transportation in infrastructure, and we've really evolved over time; just last year we conducted a survey with Building America's Future, and 400 of our members came back to us as participants of that survey and gave us their perceptions of infrastructure in the United States, and that was a very interesting process and we learned a lot from that. And then we moved from the survey to this very broad and in-depth macroeconomics study that we commissioned this year that was done by Dr. Jeff Werling from the group Inforum at the University of Maryland. Our members are major road users, and the NAM/ BAF survey in 2013 came back with our members telling us that they had the strong perception that infrastructure is in fair or poor shape, and 70% of our members told us that roads are getting worse and that infrastructure is not positioned to respond to the competitive demand of a growing economy. And so I would like to see things very focused on the future, and what are we going to do today to help support and sustain that growth we want to experience, the economic growth over the next 10 to 15 years in our country.

### **Addressing the Downward Trend in Infrastructure Investment**

The business community is well aware of the challenges with our nation's infrastructure, and you have groups like the NAM and the Chamber who have been very active advocates calling for increased infrastructure investments, yet we have this group of folks who are not entirely convinced. I think the American public is certainly there and gets it, but at the same time I think we have a lack of faith in our institutions to carry out the infrastructure investment that's needed in this country; I think that's one piece of it. I think folks also want to see greater private sector investment come into the nation's infrastructure. There's reform, and I think there are also frustrations. People see projects that take too long. I think that we're going at this maybe the wrong way in our country, and we need to be doing things a little bit differently in order to address these really big challenges that we saw in our report. I think it was very telling to us that we are in this decade of decline. And you can't deny the fact that we are experiencing decreased infrastructure investments across federal, state, and local levels. We may feel like the infrastructure investment could be happening because we see an orange cone and

some construction equipment go out somewhere, but when you look at it in the totality of the system, we're falling behind.

### **Capturing the Nation's Imagination**

I think there are a lot of failure points along the way that have occurred over time. At the end of the day I think we've also had a very difficult time explaining what it is we're doing and why we need this. The Interstate System is largely completed in the United States, and it's a great achievement, but that system needs continuous upgrade and maintenance because it is aging, and then you have the new capacity that's needed, new transit systems that are really important to economic growth and development. So you have almost multiple layers here with responsibility. And obviously, a lot is at stake. I think this is one of the pieces of the challenge that we all face: how do we capture the imagination of our nation to support the built systems? So as I mentioned earlier the Interstate System is largely completed, but we have a massive freight network in this country, and the Interstate System is part of that freight network, and obviously we're keen on exports in this country. We've seen a big growth in the export economy. 95% of the world's consumers live outside of the United States, and manufacturers are eager to tap into those markets, and when you're talking about a facility or a plant in the middle of the United States, the road system, the rails, the ports, they're all connected. Transportation is a system within systems, and I think it's very challenging to excite people and explain the importance of all of this, and that's, I think, what we're all trying to accomplish in many different ways, and how we get there is the big unanswered question right now.

### **We Can't Control the Weather, But We Can Control Our Infrastructure**

I think citizen engagement is absolutely critical and that's one of the reasons why this issue is so important to our members. We also don't just talk about issues at the NAM, we get our members engaged in talking on the Hill about the significance of these things. And I will say I think shippers have done a very good job dealing with the cards that have been dealt to them, and are very creative and innovative in solving problems, and so in many ways the congestion issues that they face, they find workarounds. But in talking to anyone who is the head of a logistics department at a major retailer or manufacturer, they will tell you they're running out of tricks, that there are not many more things for them to pull out of the hat to make it all work. And they are very concerned when they look down the road in that 5, 10, 15-year horizon, how they're going to deal with these issues. It's not just trade associations; it's citizens who are impacted by this. My commute is a lot like the weather, I can't control it and I can't change it. Well that's actually not the case, and I think that there are a lot of tools that Congress, State Departments of Transportation, the Federal Department of Transportation can be doing together to really help alleviate this problem that plagues everyone's lives from the first working hour of the day to the last working hour of the day.

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