

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Infrastructure Strategy at the Center for American Progress

The Center for American Progress really has a dual purpose in its infrastructure policy work, and that is we want to see the types of investments that will have long-term positive economic gains associated with them. We also want to make sure that when we make those investments, we do them in such a way that they have the broadest base of possible benefits. When infrastructure is done right it creates pathways of opportunity, it helps to reduce environmental footprint, it helps to provide access to education, healthcare, jobs, for people of all different sectors. When it's done poorly it can create geographic dislocation, it can raise people's costs, and it can have disproportionate negative environmental impacts on very targeted communities. So we want to understand not just how to have economic growth, but how to have economic growth that has broad-based benefits. We tend to focus on transportation probably more than other sectors, but our infrastructure portfolio is rather broad. Shipping, passenger rail, aviation—pretty much everything outside of the power sector is something that we touch upon here as part of the infrastructure portfolio. And we really want to try to understand how these investments, particularly at the federal level, influence our global competitiveness, as well as access to opportunity for diverse communities and their overall environmental sustainability. So it's sort of the classic three E's of Economy, Environment, and Equity that drive our focus here at CAP.

Transportation and the New Congress

There's part of me that's slightly optimistic in that the new Republican majority in the Senate and the expanded Republican majority in the House will feel some pressure to demonstrate to voters their ability to govern, and I think a fairly easy way to do that would be to enact a longer-term surface transportation bill, and by longer-term I don't think it will be six years; we can see something that is maybe more like two or three. I think a dramatic fall-off in Highway Trust Fund outlays, and projects being cut at the state level, would be a bad way to come out of the gate early in the next Congress. If you're this new Republican majority I don't see any real chance that the federal bill is going to grow. It will likely be some version of flat funding, give or take one or two percentage points, but predicting these things is incredibly difficult.

The Public Supports Projects They Can Envision

I think part of it has to do with the distance in people's minds between paying the taxes and what they see. When states, or at times metropolitan regions, have been successful at levying new taxes or increasing existing taxes to pay for transportation projects, they typically have the most success when they have an organized campaign, a clear slate of projects they're intending to accomplish, and people can see in their minds and really draw the dots between “here's what I'm going to pay and here in a few years is what I

think I'm going to see and how that's going to benefit me.” And that line, when you extend it all the way to Washington, becomes a lot longer, a little more convoluted, and harder for people to understand. So I think the connection between paying more and benefits becomes harder to make, and I think that we also unfortunately are just seeing a consequence of decades of really aggressive negative tax by conservatives on people’s perceptions of the federal government. When you have conservatives who wake up every day and go on TV and try to convince people that the federal government is nothing but incompetent, it turns around and kind of bites you when you then want to go back and say well actually we could stand for some more investment because there are some things we need to do and the federal government is the best actor to do those. That mistrust has been laid and it really puts up a barrier.

The Gap Between Public Perception and Reality

To a certain extent we're victims of our own success. I mean we have, for all of its problems, an unbelievably reliable power sector. For all of its problems, we have incredibly affordable clean water. For all of its problems, we have still a fundamentally sound and fantastic transportation system. Again, none of that means that we don't need investment. None of that means that there aren't real challenges, because there certainly are and that's what we've dedicated ourselves to trying to solve. But I think that it's difficult also because infrastructure happens over such a long arc of time, whereas if you compare it to something like extension of unemployment insurance, or a particular issue around a tax rate, or foreign affairs, these things are very immediate, they're very visceral, and so again when people in their daily lives experience a system that works so well with so few major disruptions and then somebody comes to them and says well you know our population's going to grow by another 100 million, and we have this many facilities that are in need of dire repair, and so on and so forth, that's a long arc of time and in some ways there's a bit of a gap between what they experience and what experts are telling them.

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