

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Now Is the Time to Rebuild New York's Infrastructure

It is clear that for decades, not just in New York but around the country, we have been failing to invest sufficiently in our infrastructure, and the results of that are pretty apparent. They're apparent, certainly, to the traveling public. As you go around the state, you see that in New York we've got more than 4,000 bridges that were built 60 some odd years ago for a 50-year lifespan. You've got about a third of our bridges, as a result, that are deficient; you've got about half of our major roads in New York that are in poor condition. The time is now for New York and really for Washington and states around the country to face up to this crisis, and fund it, and fix it, and get our infrastructure into a state of good repair. The reason why the time is right, in addition to the fact that the problem keeps getting worse as year after year the can gets kicked down the road because nobody wants to pay for it, is two-fold here in our case in New York. The first is there has been a number of bank settlements and other circumstances that have resulted in literally billions of dollars of found money arriving at the state treasury, and the result of that is that you've got a unique, really probably once in a lifetime opportunity to use those billions of dollars to make long-term significant investments in improving our infrastructure. That just happens to coincide with both the state DOT and downfit on the transit side, the MTA's capital plans being up for renewal in the budget process that will commence in earnest in January. So the problem is clear: to some degree there are significant resources there, although they don't meet the full need, and the time is right in terms of the process, which is why we've launched this campaign at this point.

The Built Environment Defines Communities

If you look back at the investments that were made, really the infrastructure that was built 50, 60 years ago, it has defined our communities across New York. It has made those communities possible. It has made their economies possible, and it was a result of that generation making a significant investment with a long view in infrastructure that made a great many things possible, and in the near term certainly put a lot of people to work building it. It's not just the immediate economic impact. AGC of America and George Mason University have run the numbers and their calculus is that for each billion dollars you invest in infrastructure, you create about 28,000 jobs, and that's not just the direct construction but that's down the supply line and everything else that's impacted by that investment, but beyond that, that infrastructure supports an economy. It lets you get goods and services from A to B. It lets people get to work. It lets kids get to school safely. It lets people in need of healthcare on an emergency basis get to a hospital safely, and when you've got roads and bridges that are in poor condition that may not be available; it not only undermines the economy, it's a threat to public safety.

It's a long-term investment. It should be looked at in the long view, and around the country this is not a unique New York problem. To a significant degree, the extent to which it is a serious problem is also impacted by a lack of action and leadership in Washington. But all around the country to varying degrees you've got an infrastructure crisis, and we think we have a unique opportunity right now in New York to put a dent in it, because again you've got billions of dollars in found money as a result of these bank settlements that are not going to be recurring revenues. When it's a one-shot revenue, investing it in a one-time expense—which is improving infrastructure that brings year after year of benefit— just makes good sense.

Society Relies on Infrastructure in Order to Function

I'm not sure that the public generally thinks about infrastructure as having as broad of an impact on everything else as it really does. Here's what I mean by that: one of the things that we did in putting this campaign together was to conduct a pretty extensive state-wide public opinion poll to really get a sense of where infrastructure is in the public psyche, where it is on the radar of issues that the public is concerned about. And the good news is that it's there. I'm not entirely sure that even 5 or 6 years ago it would have been there. I think there's been a more sustained focus on it. But the bad news is it's way down the list. If you talk to the average voter, they're thinking about infrastructure, but not surprisingly they think that jobs and taxes and the economy are more important. They think that education and healthcare are more important. Interestingly, in New York they think corruption is more important, and that's probably a result of some of the headlines that we've had around the state of late. Hopefully those are subsiding. But infrastructure was below all of those issues on the list of things that the public identifies as a priority. Now what really is striking about that is, if you take corruption out of the mix—because again I think that's sort of an anomaly given recent headlines—all the other issues that the public thinks are more important—education, jobs, the economy, healthcare—they all rely on infrastructure to be possible. And I'm not necessarily sure that the general public makes that linkage on a regular basis. They see a road that's in bad shape, they're dodging potholes, they're on a bridge that looks like it's seen better days, or they're having to take a detour because something is closed because it's in a poor condition. They think about it then, but I'm not sure they're necessarily linking it to the other priorities that they may put before infrastructure, and that's a big part of what the campaign that we're a part of is trying to do, which is to really better educate the public not only on the condition of infrastructure, but how important it is to everything else that they may right now think is more important.

The Longer We Wait, the Worse It Gets

If you look at this past year in Washington you've had, on two separate occasions, the Federal Highway Trust Fund, which is responsible for much of the funding that flows to the states that make possible their infrastructure programs, teetering on the brink of insolvency and ruin, and twice Congress doing what was literally the bare minimum necessary to keep it from going over that brink. And again, they bought themselves time now until the spring, and they're going to be back to hopefully address the long-term solution that makes the Highway Trust Fund whole. But it's just been a lack of focus and a lack of leadership. It's sort of like if you put it to the level of owning a home, right? If

you don't take care of your house, and you don't keep up the roof, eventually the roof needs to be replaced. If you don't do that, eventually your house needs to be replaced, and that's really sort of what's been happening with our infrastructure. To be clear, it's not as if these are optional things for the government to do. The government will fix infrastructure. The question is whether they're going to fix it by staying ahead of it and staying on top of it and keeping it in a good state of repair, or whether they're going to deal with it by lurching from crisis to crisis when something becomes broken and unusable. Whether it's a road or a bridge, or whether it's environmental or wastewater infrastructure, it's going to get fixed. And of course, you and I both know the latter approach is also by far the more expensive approach, not to mention the more disruptive approach to the public and the economy. And again, it all comes down to dollars and cents. There's just simply not nearly enough money available to meet the needs that are out there, and there are needs that have burgeoned year after year as we've had year after year of underinvestment.

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