

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Guest on The Infra Blog: James Boland, President, International Union of Bricklayers & Allied Craftworkers

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Building Sustainable Infrastructure, One Brick at a Time

The crafts I represent are brick and block, and granite, marble, terrazzo and tile, and then the restoration of all those products. I think they're sustainable and long-lasting products and the history of masonry is almost like the history of culture: you see it in buildings looking back over the generations. I think masonry is a very sustainable product and that's what makes it very green. If you put up something that you want to last for the eons, then use our materials which prove themselves to be ideal for that.

Unions Understand Infrastructure Investment

First of all, as members of the general public in communities throughout the country, they benefit from the upgrades in all areas of infrastructure just like every other citizen does. But as members of the construction industry— about a nickel of the construction dollar flows towards the various budgets of masonry and, of course, our people benefit from the jobs and that's nice too. So it's twofold: you benefit as an end user of the infrastructure and you benefit from getting the jobs in the process. When you are reaching out to unions, you are reaching out to our members who know it's not taxation, it's dues. The members of the Teamsters and the Bricklayers pay those dues because they know that they get good value in return. If you can do the analogy that an investment in infrastructure pays for itself over and over in time, you're starting with people who understand that, when you're starting with members of the construction unions and the labor movement. It should be self-evident to society in general, or to the public in general if we can just draw some nice parallels for them.

We Need Leadership

The ironic thing about this is that both parties agree on the need for improved infrastructure across the board, and even though they agree on it in principle, they haven't gotten serious about how to fund this. Either you raise more money for infrastructure from new sources or you cut other spending. Since there's no big effort to reduce some of the big outstanding budget items, you've got to explain to people to do this that you've got to raise a little more money somehow. This would be a good time to do it because we've got low interest rates and we've got cheap gasoline, and if they got serious to make a bipartisan effort to get this stuff rolling, I think now is an opportune time but it takes leadership. I'm very hopeful that the younger generation is much more conscious of these things. I know how important public transportation is to young people nowadays. You know, they come out of college loaded with debt and the first thing on their mind isn't to buy a car or two cars, it's how to get to and from work without incurring that kind of cost. With the smaller window of opportunity that young people have compared with a generation or two ago, I think that they're much more cost-conscious and think

about how public spending could be affected in such a way to benefit them more, so I'm hoping we'll see an uptick in public awareness on subjects like infrastructure maintenance and spending.

Infrastructure & Government: Making a Plan

I think it's crazy, in a way. I'm sitting here in New Orleans. There were proposals before Katrina to upgrade the levees. It didn't happen and you had a catastrophe that cost many, many, many times the cost of the upgrade in the first place. So we were penny wise and pound foolish, in that respect. I think about gas lines blowing up in San Bruno, California because of inadequate maintenance and inspection. I think a big part of it is monitoring the infrastructure that's in place already and making sure it's up to snuff and if it's not, well, fixing it or replacing it is usually important. But we don't seem to have a serious policy in place for dealing with it in a rational way like that. Our generation and the generation before us were fully aware of the need for government spending and public spending or at least partial public spending to carry out these huge projects and in the '80s the conservative movement came along and they demonized government and they demonized it for some of the welfare programs and did so unfairly. But by the time they were done with the project, they had everybody pointing the finger at government as something that wasn't necessarily good while a good society functions when you have good government and good governance, and good infrastructure development is evident of that.

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