

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Guest on The Infra Blog: Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Ernest L. Arbuckle Professor at Harvard Business School & Author of *MOVE: Putting America's Infrastructure Back in the Lead*

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Infrastructure Touches Every Aspect of Life

I'm a professor at Harvard Business School, and I'm part of a project at HBS on U.S. competitiveness, and in our surveys it was clear that logistics in infrastructure bother business leaders because it doesn't work as well as it should. In fact, over a three-year period, more people said it was getting worse than getting better, so I said to my colleagues, "I'll take this on; this is really important." As I dug into it and convened a national summit with leaders in industry, government, advocacy associations it became clear it was incredibly important, that it touches every aspect of life. It certainly touches business and the ability to get goods forced into market. It touches businesses as employers, commuters who have to get to work. It touches families because transportation is such a big part of family budgets. It touches health, congestion and pollution. It touches the environment. It touches inequality because the poor don't have access to good transportation. It is such an important underlying issue that it ought to be at the top of the national agenda if we want to fix anything else. I also saw that it's an issue that should be nonpartisan because red states' bridges crumble just as quickly as blue states' bridges, and yet it's still so contentious. I devoted nearly two years to in-depth investigation from the point of view of users of our systems, and America's position in the world, and concluded that if we don't get moving we're going to fall further behind the rest of the world, and if we're not strong at home we can't be strong as world leaders.

We Need to Develop a National Infra Vision

I wrote my book *MOVE* in a really reader-friendly way so that people who are interested in policy and the technical aspects would get a lot out of it, but so would the ordinary citizen who doesn't know much about this. There are several reasons. One is the word "infrastructure" as gets said endlessly doesn't exactly sizzle, except that now it's on the lips of more and more people. Secondly, we tend to talk about issues in America in silos, so it's industry by industry, mode of transportation by mode of transportation, so we talk about trains separately from airplanes, separately from buses, separately from cars, and a lot of our policies set down in the 1950s and 1960s were car-centric policies. It's talked about in ways that don't make it possible for people to connect the dots. Then a lot of the discussion is about deterioration, it's about the need for repair, and I think repair is only one of the three R's. We need Repair, Renewal, and Reinvention. But there is no vision of reinventing it. And repairs, sure we know we need repairs, but maintenance is not a vision. You can't get people all fired up about too many potholes on certain streets, although they write me about that. I'm now getting a lot of mail,

emails from people who want to tell me about their particular street or the construction project near them. So we also tend to think about these things in terms of our own comfort and convenience, understandably, but there isn't yet a sense of a national vision, national agenda. That in part also accounts for gridlock in Washington because it's too easy for states or representatives in certain districts not to think about the nation as a whole, but to think about only their own place. And yet it should be one connected nation.

Now That the Conversation is Going, Leaders Need to Take Charge

I wrote *MOVE* to help contribute to the conversation, so that actually parents could talk with their kids about this around the dinner table, could be a little bit more informed about the history of rail in America, could be more informed about what the smartphone and wireless networks now make possible. Sure, Uber has changed the taxi industry in New York, and taxis actually could be using technology too. I mean, there's a reason that entrepreneurs threaten the establishment, but they often have a better idea that the establishment shouldn't block but should try to take on as well. And so people do need to be informed. They do need to think about what's possible and that we could invent a better future, because other countries do have forms of transportation or ways of doing things that are ahead of the United States, and many people in the U.S. don't like to think of us as anything other than number one, but sadly there are some areas in which we are not number one. Well, my goal is to stimulate the conversation so that we can reach for excellence again. But that requires leadership. It requires leadership certainly at the national level. Leadership from governors and mayors, and there have been some very visionary mayors about transportation and infrastructure. It's just that the mayors are limited in what they can do unless there's also federal funding and some national consensus that it's important.

People Need to Know That There ARE Solutions

I'm an expert on leadership and change, and so that was the other reason I took on infrastructure. It's crying out for leadership and it's a big systems-change issue. But you don't scare people into change. You know, people get scared for a while, they're concerned, but the train derailment in Philadelphia was very tragic, the train derailment on May 12th, very tragic, and people are hopping back on the trains once they feel satisfied that the cause of the accident is not going to affect them. It's hard to scare people. You really motivate people for change when they see a vision. They see a plan, they see a strategy, and they see demonstrated success. The other thing I'm hearing around the country is a lot of people who don't believe that if the investments were made, that the money would be well spent. And I find that disturbing because I think sometimes they're absolutely right. Money hasn't been well spent. You know, they're concerned about more bridges to nowhere. That's why in my book *MOVE* I make a point of finding some model projects that demonstrate what can be done, and that it can be done on time, and even under budget if you have really good managers. Sometimes you might have public-private partnerships with all sectors involved, and when people see that, then there's room for hope. But if people think it's all going to be wasted then often—this is true, by the way, in any company in any country—that when people feel

that they're not sure that investment will be well spent, they'd rather stay with the status quo, as awful as it is, and they start to plan around it. So they start to plan those two extra hours to get to work every day. And so they make it seem normal and they don't see an alternative, and they think that the alternative will mean it will take longer for a while because of the construction. So I think that we have to convince people that there are positive things happening, that technology can play a very positive role, that there are things that can happen quickly. I was really impressed with the sensors that were put into highways by some entrepreneurial, innovative companies in record time. That is, the sensors which help with traffic management could be put in in a few hours so that streets didn't have to be torn up, and how wonderful is that that there's technology that can do it better. How wonderful is it that parking apps on your smartphone—and I used to joke and say, “Well, parking apps aren't going to change the world”—but parking apps actually reduce congestion on city streets because a lot of the congestion is people driving around looking for parking.

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