

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Infrastructure Needs More than a Band-Aid

It's really difficult to believe that something as essential to the American economy as transportation is something that the federal government and Congress can't come together around. I think there have been some vocal members who have pushed hard for and articulated the need for that stable, long-term funding source, but they have not been the prevailing voices, and instead we get these kind of stop-gap measures that kick us down the road a year or two. Infrastructure is an issue where you have to have long-term solutions so that you can do long-term planning and build for competitiveness over the course of decades, not a course of months. There really aren't any successful entities out there that aren't planning for the long term. Businesses are thinking about longer-term horizons and making investments for their competitive futures over the course of years and decades. Everybody understands intuitively the value of thinking ahead, and particularly for things that have a long wait time. You can't suddenly understand, "oh we need better transit," and make it happen tomorrow. These things have lead times. Whether you're talking about roads, transit, biking infrastructure, other things, you've got to anticipate those needs before they are evident and then act on them so that you are bringing a solution to the market at the time when that solution is demanded. And planning a year or two ahead just does not cut it in that context. We've seen that over and over. Consistently in public opinion surveys and in other places the American people know it; it just isn't being reflected in the leadership.

Congress Needs to Realize What States Already Know

It is amazing to see what local governments and states have done, and how much they have responded. Some of that is amazing in terms of their pro-activeness, and then some is less amazing because it's become so desperate that they really had to do something, and unlike Congress, they didn't have the luxury of kicking the issue off another two years without thinking about the longer term. So we've obviously seen ballot initiatives, legislative initiatives, other efforts around the country to put sustainable sources of funding into transportation. But the federal government has got to play its part. You know infrastructure: it's an inter-state issue. It crosses boundaries between different places, and even within states there are critical investments that are key to a system that functions not just as the system within the state but one that is vital to the entire Northeastern Corridor, or in freight across the country, and those ought to be federal responsibilities and federal activities. When you look more broadly just at our competitive position in the world, our metropolitan areas are the engines of our economy, and we don't seem to have a transportation system or a federal system that really recognizes and understands the important roles that those places play, and the ways that those places function, and what that means about the kinds of investments that are needed now.

We're Idly Watching Our Infrastructure Crumble

Our transportation systems, our water and sewer systems, our power and electric grid: all of those really suffer from delays in maintenance, from basically resting on the laurels of investments made by previous generations, and then not putting in the money to keep those systems in good shape. You don't think we're in a third-world country, and then a bridge collapses. It's not that we were a little remiss in getting to the maintenance. We simply didn't do it and it collapsed and people died and the economy was interrupted and so we're letting those systems go so far that we're getting really evident bright red flags being waved, and those are hugely important as sort of things that get people's attention to the issue. But then there are also the kind of sleeper issues of how much more we're paying by not doing the proper maintenance. You can save nine dollars for every dollar of maintenance you put in if you can do just the basic maintenance on a road or a bridge or on your water and sewer rather than having to replace the whole thing later. The analogy I like to make for people is: you can fix a leak in your roof, or you can wait around until it's warping your floors and then you've got to replace all the floors and fix the leak. So timely maintenance just saves tons of money, and in too many places we see that instead of fixing that leak in the roof, we're busy adding rooms to the house. And you have to wonder what the priorities are where you're adding more and more infrastructure while you're not taking proper care of the stuff you've already got.

Smart Growth America: Making Communities Better

The mission is really simple: it's to make people's lives better by making their communities better, and working together with those communities to accomplish that. Understanding the things that are adding value and increasing the livability, the competitiveness of their communities and helping them to realize those visions. In terms of the strategy, a lot of it is just basic education, and helping people to understand what they're seeing around them. Why do communities work the way they do? In the places that they travel, where they have a lot of transportation options, how do they get those? We just put out a report called *Core Values: Why Businesses Are Moving Downtown*, hoping to document the trend in the economy where businesses and knowledge workers and others are seeking out walkable, bikeable communities with a lot of transportation and housing choices. Understanding that they are, in fact, competing on the basis of the kinds of places they're creating now that the economic development model is changing away from a kind of smoke-stack chasing economy to one where you're chasing knowledge and talent, and that knowledge and talent is able to make choices about where they live, and they're increasingly choosing on the basis of quality of life, quality of place, quality of housing and transportation choices.

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