

# InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**David Raymond, President & CEO, American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC)**

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

## **Feeling the Effects of Our Third-world Infrastructure**

I think we have seen what would amount to colossal failure in addressing infrastructure jobs, and the reason I say that is all one needs to do is visit other countries where they've taken infrastructure challenges more seriously and you very readily find out that the US is becoming more and more a third-world country in terms of its infrastructure. Now, people who go to work in the morning through all of the potholes in their roads, or through broken down subway systems, or through airports that don't produce capacity for either passengers or airlines, they see only the snippet at one time, but if you look at all of this that's going on in the United States, you very readily realize that we have already fallen way behind. And in many ways we've fallen further behind in our transportation systems and even farther than what some people think is the damage we've done to our environment through climate change, and the man-made contribution to climate change. The point of no return, I think, in infrastructure is already reflected in a relatively weak economy, and our inability to really lead the world anymore.

## **A Unique Generational Opportunity & Responsibility**

The generational opportunity comes in kind of a strange way, as a result of the fact that the weakened economy has given us interest rates that are so low that you can almost borrow money free in order to invest in infrastructure development that will cost so little over the long term, as against the benefit that we'll reap in having a base that will be conducive to economic growth. So that's one side of the generational opportunity that we have. Another generational opportunity that we have is really more of a challenge. We've got to get our kids to understand the role of infrastructure development in our society, and not to be satisfied with the poorly performing infrastructure that they have. I would take every kid in the country, put them on a plane, and fly them all over the world to show them what this nation really could be about if they really put their mind to it.

## **We Desperately Need Leadership**

There is a complete lack of leadership in Washington for anything that has to do with our infrastructure, and quite frankly there's a lack of leadership in many other areas as well. It starts at the top with the President; it goes right through the leadership in the Congress. People are not behaving as leaders these days. All they're doing is dealing with the lowest common denominator of any kind of partisan activity that will achieve some short-term gain for themselves. They're not dealing with the big issues that are confronting the country, and this has been going on for some time. This isn't new this year. This has been going on for many years now. We have had an unsatisfactory level

of attention to all of the major issues that confront our society. No attention to infrastructure. No attention to immigration reform. No attention to just a slew of issues that confront our society. So we've got our heads stuck in the sand.

### **Engineers Are the Voice of Reason, But We Don't Hear Them**

Engineers have a lot to say. They're very truthful in the expression of what our society needs to do in order to perform better. The fact is that engineers, because of their technical knowledge and background, are not well versed in how to deal with the politics of our society. So they have not engaged in politics and that's really a shame. And so in effect, the knowledge that engineers have and are willing to express is pretty much drowned out by those who go into the public square mouthing all kinds of craziness, but are very adept at doing it in order to make political headway.

### **Educated Public and Engaged Leadership**

The problem is that Americans take for granted the infrastructure that they have. They don't know where it comes from. They don't know that it is being degraded over time. And until we have a calamity such as a bridge collapse, they don't even know that there's difficulty with it. So Americans are very resilient people; they put up with a lot, their country is becoming more of a third-world country, and it's very unfortunate and I hate to say, the only time Americans are really going to wake up to this is when stuff absolutely disappears. Nobody cares about the environment until you can hardly breathe. And nobody cares about infrastructure until it completely collapses, and then it costs a lot more to implement remedial measures. It's a very, very difficult thing to do anything about. People don't care about schools until they're completely non-performing. It's one thing after the other. So we need leaders who can point to the areas where we need to make much greater progress and we don't have those leaders. We need a public that is much better educated about infrastructure and other areas, and we don't have that. We even have a national building museum in Washington which has very few programs dealing with America's infrastructure. Even though it's called the National Building Museum. And that's pretty extraordinary in and of itself, and says a lot. So there are a lot of places where we should be turning our attention to see how we can move forward constructively. Aside from saying that Americans will recognize a collapse of some kind and do something about it, I'm not so sure that we can recognize trends and do anything about them until we get to a very egregious point.

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