InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Two Years, Not Ten Years: The Outrageous Cost of Delaying Infra Projects
There is a widespread call from all sides to rebuild America's decrepit infrastructure, which has a D+ rating from the American Society of Civil Engineers. The highways, the bridges, the rail lines, the power infrastructure, the water lines, the waste treatment plants: most of them were built by our grandparents or great grandparents, or our great great grandparents. We need to update it and there is a financing issue with the infrastructure which people have focused on and there's a problem there, but there's a bigger hurdle which is that no one has the authority to actually approve the infrastructure, and if anything is in the least bit controversial it takes a decade or longer to get approval, and often it drives up the cost, dramatically, and it often makes it so that people don't even try to rebuild infrastructure. They don't want to spend all the time and not know whether it's going to get approved or not. So what we did in this report was actually try to quantify the cost of delay. What does this decade-long approval process do to our prospects and costs of rebuilding America's infrastructure? Well, it turns out that the delay costs far exceed the actual cost of rebuilding the infrastructure. More than double. And even more ironically it turns out that the delay, much of which is due to kind of a "no pebble left unturned" approach to environmental review, is bad for the environment! All those years where people are wringing their hands over the best way to do something, bottlenecks are being tolerated and continued and, just to use one example, the rickety power grid wastes so much electricity it's the equivalent of 200 coal-burning power plants. Every year we don't rebuild our power grid is like having 200 coal-burning power plants spewing carbon in the air.

It's Time for a System-Wide Overhaul
The pattern of societies in general is that things get worse, and they get worse, and they get worse, and finally everything gets changed at once. If you look at the history of this country, you know the last time we had really big changes in the way we ran our society was in the 1960s. We woke up to racism, and pollution, and lots of other bad things, and we had all these changes. Before that it was the New Deal and people were starving, so we created this social safety net. And before that was the progressive era and the progressives had agitated for decades to try to put laws in place to protect child labor and the like. It was only when Upton Sinclair wrote his exposé of the meat packing plant that everything changed. So we're at one of those points where lots of things have to change in our society, and one of them happens to be the legal infrastructure. You can't have a democracy where the people you elect actually don't have the authority that goes along with their responsibility. The President doesn't have the authority to say, "Yes, rebuild that bridge." He has to go through a decade-long process. What we argue

in this report is that it's kind of a form of legal mental illness. It's bad for everybody. Bad for the environment, bad for costs, bad for everybody.

Decisive Leadership Excites the Public
People don't have a sense of ownership of their society now. They wake up in the morning and they worry about themselves, and they don't see the link to how the systems around them are working. And you know we need more civic engagement. We need more civic ownership, and we need leaders who can do that. I think you get those leaders and you get people more engaged if people are actually making decisions. Authority has kind of a gravitational pull because they feel like that person, they may make a decision that I don't like and so that gets you more excited about who you elect, and then once you're elected it gets people more excited about staying in touch with them and arguing and participating in public hearings. When nobody can make a decision, everything just stays the same, and that's sort of where we are in this country.

Common Good: Making the System Work Again
Common Good is a non-partisan organization dedicated to updating and simplifying our legal structures so that people can make choices during the day that are practical and make sense to the people affected by them, instead of, for example, being stuck in an endless bureaucracy.There's not one government program that isn't broken. For infrastructure, we've proposed radically simplifying the decision-making process. Giving someone, the Council on Environmental Quality, the authority to decide when there's been enough review, to give someone in the White House the authority to issue permits, to decide among disputing agencies. When you go to government today, you're not going for a permit, you're going for 20 different permits, and it's not from one government, it's from 20 different governments, and each one of those agencies could care less what the other agencies care about. So you need a way to consolidate decision-making. It's very simple. We've done a draft legislation to do this; it's only one page long, it's very easy to do.

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