

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

The Crisis Beneath Our Feet

The challenge with the water infrastructure crisis is that it's largely out of sight, out of mind, whereas transportation, you can see it, you can touch it, you drive on the highway, you ride on the bus, you ride on the light rail. Water is really largely out of sight, out of mind, but a water main breaks every two minutes in this country. The Society of Civil Engineers gives the state of our water and wastewater systems a "D" grade. What's interesting is that water and sewer lines are thirty times the length of the interstate highway system, and so this is massive, massive infrastructure, and most of our water infrastructure wastewater infrastructure was built fifty years ago, a hundred years ago, and it's been running around the clock, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. So we really have a crisis beneath our feet when it comes to our water infrastructure, and now is really the time to invest.

Water Is a Thread Through Our Economy

What's interesting about our water system is that many of the drinking water and wastewater systems around the country were built with federal support. We had major capital programs that came out of the federal government—the Clean Water Act, et cetera—that helped finance these projects. But that has really changed and we have seen steadily declining federal support for infrastructure investments in the water sector. Nowadays, 98% of water projects are paid for by the local rate base, and so the truth is that in order to make these investments people are going to have to pay more, and it is those local ratepayers. We're really proud to convene a national coalition called the Value of Water Coalition, and what we're really trying to do through the Value of Water Coalition is help people understand that water is this daily thread that is in their lives. So most people think, "Ok, I turn on the tap, I pour myself a glass of drinking water, I flush the toilet and that's how water exists in my life," but water is a thread through our entire economy. It takes, for example, 2900 gallons of water to make a single pair of blue jeans, or 880 gallons to make one gallon of milk. And so water is in everything that we eat, it's in everything we wear, it's in all of our devices. We need clean water in order to have all of the goods and services we have in our lives. So what we're really doing through the Value of Water Coalition is making that argument to people that water is essential and when you start from that place and then talk about why we need to invest in the infrastructure and all the job benefits and other benefits of that investment, people get it. People are willing to pay more when they understand what's at stake for the quality of their daily lives.

Investing in the Water of the Future

I actually think we have it right in a lot of different ways. If you look all around the country you see water providers who are making the investments in their infrastructure and they're doing it in a very forward-looking way. All around the country you see, for example, wastewater agencies that are rebuilding their wastewater treatment plants but doing it in a way where they're generating energy, or they're recovering phosphorous and other key minerals that are important for agricultural uses. So there are lots of stories like that. I could go on and on about good stories of investment happening with great community outcomes. I think the challenge is how do we take that and scale it up, so we're making the investments fast enough to ensure that we have applicable water systems into the future. That's really, I think, where we need to be focusing our time and attention: what are the types of public-private partnerships that we need that can help us accelerate these investments, how do we have a stronger federal partner. We're not even asking for grants. Grants are wonderful, but even access to low-cost capital is critically important, and having mechanisms where we can share the innovation across different cities across the country are things that I think we can do more of and get to impact faster.

Successful Citizen Engagement: Imagine a Day Without Water

The Value of Water Coalition convened something called *Imagine a Day Without Water*, and the very purpose was to get everyday folks to think about water and the role that it plays in their lives and then really talk about the need for investment in the infrastructure that brings it to their homes and businesses and takes it away and cleans it. And what we found was that when you offered an opportunity for people to engage, they loved it. We had over 185 organizations participating all around the country; we did a social media campaign, had over 6 million individuals engaged in that effort; we did radio and earned media and reached about 3 million listeners. We had people taking to the streets who were taking videos of their neighbors and their local businesses, really asking them to imagine what their lives would be like without water. So we were really excited by that. But I think we need more opportunities for engaging citizens around not just their water infrastructure, but infrastructure generally, because we've got to make it real for folks, we've got to make it concrete. Infrastructure as a term can be very abstract and through storytelling, through art, through citizen dialogue, we get people to connect to the infrastructure that fuels their daily lives and the lives of their children. I think that's what we need to do as a community.

We Care About What We Understand

Before coming to the U.S. Water Alliance, I worked for the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission for a number of years, and the SFPUC basically provides drinking water, wastewater and municipal power services to a large part of the Bay Area. One thing that was exceptional that the organization focused on is really teaching people about their water system, so in San Francisco water traveled 167 miles from the Yosemite National Park down to sea level, and that's this beautiful, pristine drinking water that we enjoy. The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission took people up to Hetch Hetchy every year to see their drinking system. They showed the treatment plants, they showed where we generated power, they showed where we treated the wastewater once you flush your toilet. And what I will tell you is everybody who has toured the system is a fan

of the system. They walk away from those tours feeling like this is my system and I'm going to protect it. And so I think the more showing versus telling that we do around our infrastructure systems, the better we are and the earlier we do it, the better we are. And what we have found is when you actually talk to young people, like for example my 8-year-old daughter; she knows where her water comes from. She says, "Mommy, my water comes from Hetch Hetchy in Yosemite National Park" and she is the biggest environmental water conservationist as an 8 year old, because she knows where her water comes from. She understands the value of it and that's how we get to changing the water mindset and the infrastructure mindset in this country is by starting with young folks—because they're the next-generation stewards—and really to inspire them around their ownership of these essential infrastructures.

U.S. Water Alliance: Changing The Way We See Water

The U.S. Water Alliance is focused on driving a paradigm shift in the way that the nation views, values, and manages water. I think that too often people take water for granted: you turn on the tap and clean water flows, you flush the toilet and your dirty water goes away. But the truth is that we have both a water-scarcity challenge in this country, and globally, and a water-quality challenge. The U.S. Water Alliance is focused on bringing together all the different interests that matter for a clean water future—so water providers, the corporate community, environmental leaders, the agricultural community—to work together to drive greater investment in water infrastructure and drive new solutions and innovations around water-resource management.

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