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Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Rick Harnish, Executive Director, Midwest High Speed Rail Association

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

People Finally See the Need for Trains

On the ground there is definitely a difference. I have been meeting with local leaders and communities all around the Midwest. I've been doing this now for 16 years, and when I first started it was kind of like, "Trains are OK; it would be nice if we had trains, but that's kind of a pipe dream." And now there is a clear recognition amongst lots of folks that it really is needed—especially as transportation options that we have continue to get worse, and there really is no way that air service is going to get better. We continue to build highways in the wrong places where they're not needed. We've rebuilt the Kennedy two or three times without really adding any capacity to it. So you can't add highway capacity where really it would make a difference, and people are starting to recognize that, and there is the ability to tap into that and come up with a new program. And that's what we're focused on now, is changing the way we look at what high speed rail is and tapping into this very strong local level of support to make it happen.

The FAST Act: 5 More Years of the Status Quo

I think the transportation bill is pretty much status quo on everything. There really wasn't much change. The only change being that they decided to get farther and farther away from user fees. So it's kind of frustrating that there was this lie for so many years that highways paid for themselves with gas taxes, and every couple of years we'd get farther away from that, and still there is an expectation that trains pay for themselves through fares. It's frustrating that we continue with these policies that are so counter productive. Rather than figuring out how to get more people on bikes and more people into trains and buses and get the country headed in a much more productive, more enjoyable, safer environment, Congress kind of punted and decided to steal money from other places to keep the existing growth of highway networks moving forward. You know, there were good things in there but it was all on the margins. It was not a comprehensive look at how we are going to move forward and adjust ourselves to new economic realities. It really was just maintaining the status quo for another 5 years.

High Speed Rail: Moving Forward Despite the Challenges

California high speed rail really is under construction. I went out and saw the construction sites. That's huge. The project from Las Vegas to Victorville has changed in a very positive way from kind of this outlier driven by a couple of individuals who recognized that the future of Las Vegas depends upon them getting high speed rail, and these couple of individuals really pushed it, but it was outside of the process. For various reasons both the Federal Railroad Administration and the California High Speed Rail Authority realize that that is a critical piece of the entire California High Speed Rail network. And so there's a lot more cooperation there in making those two work together

and getting them to move forward together. That's a huge step forward. And I hope that they are right that they can start construction on that soon. So that's a big step. Another big step is in Texas where there's an effort underway to move basically a shuttle train between Houston and Dallas forward. That really is a huge step. That's also causing regulatory changes at the FRA that are needed to move high speed rail forward as is the California project. So that's making it easier to implement it because we have some very outdated safety regulations that actually don't make the trains any safer. And those two projects are changing those regulations. And then when that gets underway they're not going to do the other pieces that really needed to be added onto it, and the state will be then motivated to figure out how to do, for example, the Dallas to Fort Worth piece. And so that's changing the climate there politically dramatically. Between St. Paul Airport and Rochester Minnesota there's an effort underway that is very important. There's the state doing an EIS, but then a private entity coming in and saying, well, we would like the right to go out and do some surveying so that we can figure out how to really make this work. And so that's changing the paradigm in Minnesota. Here in Illinois we've been seeing a lot more interest in doing true high speed rail and we think we're close to an important next step there. And I was out in Sacramento two months ago and touched the first car shell for that line. That's something that most people don't know: those trains really are under construction, and the stations are under construction. So we're very close to a major tipping point.

www.InfrastructureUSA.org
212.414.9220
info@infrastructureusa.org