

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Infra Doesn't Get the Airtime it Deserves

We do have a whole generation that doesn't understand that electricity doesn't come out of a wall: it comes through some wires and some power plants somewhere. We haven't educated people very well, despite the fact that I think there have been some important efforts. For example, my background is in the electric power business, and I know the Edison Electric Institute has a significant communications program, and a number of utilities have significant outreach and communications programs, but people don't really pay attention until a storm comes through and knocks the trees down, and all of a sudden they flip the switch and it doesn't go on. I'm well aware that there's a lot of reports about grid stability issues, and the impact of solar and wind and how are we going to manage the grid. The other thing is they're not very exciting issues compared to some of the other stories of the day, and so they don't get the national air time that they should. I read a report that threw out some numbers that are billions or even trillions of dollars over the next number of decades to advance our infrastructure. The information's out there but it doesn't get the coverage.

Taking the Fight to Washington

The funding issues start with local, state, national governments and so on. There have been many, many reports about the inadequacy of infrastructure, and the need for upgrades, and the fact that much of it is 50 years old. Look at Flint, Michigan as a perfect example of how things got out of control. Now I'm not an expert in that area, but the stories I've been reading, is they've underfunded it for years. So funding is a huge issue, and it's a prioritization issue in my mind. Collectively, society hasn't done a very good job on that. One of the things ASME does, we have a very significant Washington office, and we do a lot of work on policy input. We, like many other professional engineering societies, also have a congressional fellows program where we help fund mid-to-upper-level senior managers, executives to spend a year on sabbatical from their company in Washington working on various energy committees—or other committees, or in the Office of Science and Technology Policy—to try to provide some better insight into some of these issues. Now that's not the public, but it is trying to influence the policy to help them understand the importance of some of the issues, so it's a multi-pronged effort.

Doing More to Spread the Word

Certainly at the policy level we try to influence in Washington, but we also have issued a number of white papers on various important subjects that relate to infrastructure, energy and so on. We also have programs where we try to get people out talking to schools. We do that certainly in the areas of science, technology, STEM education—

engineering and mathematics. I've done it over the years: I've given talks in my local community and my expertise happens to be energy, so I would go out and give some talks in the community on energy issues. We do a lot of that kind of stuff. We've worked on some examples of where there've been complex system failures, like in Deepwater Horizon. We can try to convey those messages, but we can do more. We can always do more. I think one of the biggest challenges in this area is getting people to understand what the issues are, but it's not as exciting as some other things until it goes wrong, as Flint has certainly shown. It's an important thing and it really is so important to our economy. We need to do a better job, all of us, at getting the message across. People need to understand that those roads, those bridges, the highways, the electrical infrastructure, the oil and gas infrastructure, our ports and harbors, these are all vital to our world commerce. And if we don't have a healthy infrastructure it's going to badly affect our economy. The fact that we have to spend so much money is a negative side, but people need to understand the benefits and the benefits are significant and the downsides of not doing it are also very significant. So it's a tough challenge.

ASME's Infrastructure Role

The issue of infrastructure is important to ASME members for a lot of reasons. First of all we should all be interested in it as citizens because it's so important to our way of life, but it really goes beyond that in many, many ways. ASME's mission is to use technology to make the world a better place, improve quality of life and so on. And so from the point of view of fulfilling our mission it is a very good fit. Beyond that, we really have a lot of skills that are very relevant to many of these issues. Energy's a great example. It's one of ASME's biggest focus areas, and so we have a tremendous amount of people working in that area and inputting to that area. But I can look at other areas, I mean materials division, rail division. All of these things require a lot of engineering input, and these days when engineering is starting to become more multi-discipline, mechanical engineering is one of those fields that's at the base of a lot of these areas. So there's a real role for us to be heavily involved in many of the challenges that the nation faces.

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