

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Henry Petroski, Historian & Author of *The Road Taken: The History and Future of America's Infrastructure*

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Good Infrastructure Is Essential to the Economy

There was legislation passed last December that extended to 5 years out, which has eased up the problem of longer-range planning. Unfortunately that legislation only accounts for revenue for the next 3 years as I recall, so there still is going to remain the problem of how to fund, in particular, the Highway Trust Fund, which is where most of the money for roads and bridges comes from as far as the federal government is concerned. The gas tax, for example, was instituted back in 1932 but at that time the revenue from the gas tax was used to balance the federal government's budget rather than to fix up roads and bridges. So even if we get out of the conundrum and use the money for what it's intended, we still may or may not have problems depending on what the government's thinking is at a particular time. It's key to the future of infrastructure, I think, that everybody involved have a sense of citizenship, have a sense of commitment to the bigger picture, to both the economy and to the capital improvements in terms of roads and bridges. There's no doubt that having a good infrastructure is a help to the economy. That's been, I think, made clear over and over and over again. It's essential. If we have roads that are congested, people that should be at work are stuck in traffic, deliveries that should be made are stuck on the highway, and planning for businesses and for individuals, offices, simply can't proceed in a rational way.

Why We Don't Have High Speed Rail

It should be considered a national embarrassment that we don't have a better —a high speed rail system. Historically, I think we can understand why we don't. We developed railroads earlier than those countries you mentioned. So when it came to technology of the latter 20th century they were able to develop high speed rail. We thought we had our rail established, we thought we could put in, say, the Northeast Corridor high speed rail through something like the Acela train, but it just hasn't worked. You can't really bring existing infrastructure up to speed, if you will. The high-speed networks around the world that have been so successful have really been built from scratch. And the United States would just have to bite the bullet and admit that. But of course it becomes a big problem in already developed areas like the Northeast Corridor. Where are you going to find the right of way?

We Keep Writing Checks for Bad Work

I think there's a lot of dysfunction in Washington—that's become a cliché. But I think among the people who use the infrastructure, the roads and bridges in particular, they see new roads paved and they see them deteriorate awfully quickly. I've got in my neighborhood a stretch of road that

was paved literally two months ago, and it's already developed potholes. Now that simply shouldn't happen. Why is that happening? It's poor workmanship, or it's lack of understanding of what good workmanship is, or there's some kind of corruption that says “well, we'll just pave the road and then we'll pave the road again in a few months, then we'll pave the road again in another few months,” and whoever is overseeing the contracts from the municipal side or the government side is ignoring the fact that it wasn't done right in the first place. Roads that aren't paved correctly should not be paid for. They should be redone. If we have something, work done in our house and it's not done right, we expect the contractor to redo it. We don't just write another check. I believe unfortunately that too many times the government that represents the people and spends the people's tax money does do just that.

Infra Maintenance & Replacement: Common Sense

I think the popular culture has changed. Music has become a very big part of young people's lives, video games and electronics, all of these very fast moving and glitzy things. A bridge or a road is not very sexy. We just have to admit that. It's a static thing. It doesn't move. It doesn't make a particularly fancy noise. Politicians get involved at a very high level when there's a dedication of a new bridge, or they cut the ribbon proudly when a new road is opened, but what they forget and don't seem to care about is that everything wears out. And this is part of our experience. Why it's so difficult to understand about infrastructure is beyond me, but we go to the dentist regularly for preventative care. We know that our clothes will wear out and we have to buy new ones. It's just a fact of life. It's a fact of the way things work, that maintenance is important - maintenance and replacement. But paving a road to bring it back to good shape, that just isn't a sexy part of the relationship that politicians have with citizens.

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