

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Congressman Earl Blumenauer, U.S. Representative for Oregon's 3rd District**

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

### **Starting to Make the Right Decisions**

It's fascinating for me to watch the pace of change accelerate. I, as a child legislator, authored legislation in Oregon in 1973 that created a transportation commission and mandated a multi-modal comprehensive statewide transportation plan. That was the same Oregon legislature that enacted the country's first comprehensive statewide mandatory land-use planning that's resulted in every square inch being planned, zoned and mapped. Watching these elements come together in our community has been eye opening. It's given us an opportunity during my ten years as Portland's commissioner of public works dealing with the integration of land use and transportation, trying to extend a light rail line into a system, bicycle and pedestrian initiatives, and the introduction of the modern streetcar. I've been fascinated to watch these things radiate out from a quirky little corner of the Pacific Northwest to become part of what is happening from coast to coast. We have over two-dozen cities now dealing with modern streetcars. Virtually every community has light rail. We're watching signature efforts in the city of New York to reclaim parts of the right of way, to repurpose them for people and non-mechanized transportation. And last but not least, the whole approach to land use: while there are few states that do what Oregon does, we're watching metropolitan areas around the country tackling opportunities to use land use itself as an extension of solving transportation problems. I actually am quite encouraged by the leadership from coast to coast, what people are figuring out on their own and being able to make the case to local voters and secure significant investments to help them cope with the future.

### **Water: The Crisis Hidden Under the Surface**

The condition of what's under the surface is as bad or worse than the road conditions that capture people's attention. Potholes, bridges falling down are visible and capture people's attention, but we have 1.8 million miles of sewer and water pipe, much of it at or past the end of its useful life. We leak more water than we drink every day. We have a situation like Flint, Michigan where a community paid as near as I can tell the highest rates for water in the country and it was unsafe. But what's coming out in media accounts is that the lead condition is not unique to Flint. Actually here in Portland, there's renewed concern about lead in water in school buildings. We continue to face challenges on water supply, water quality as a result of what's occurring with climate change. We're watching pressures building in the aftermath of the Florida drought revealing an inability to actually have adequate water supplies, and efforts at conservation, to the extent that they're successful, have produced a more concentrated flow of sewage which is harder on the pipes and the infrastructure, creating more problems. The federal government used to invest dramatically more than it does today.

We have about a quarter of what was invested during the Carter administration. The pressures for many smaller jurisdictions to be able to adequately fund their challenges to meet environmental standards, and deal with supply issues, is severely stressed. We have sinkholes occurring across the country because of problems again under the surface. Unlike the highway trust fund which, although it's inadequate and is slowly going bankrupt, we have no similar resource like a "water trust fund." Over the last several congresses I've developed and introduced water-trust-fund legislation to at least get that process started. We as a country, because of aging infrastructure, because there are hundreds of thousands of jurisdictions that are involved with water supply and treatment, because we're learning more about the problems in our drinking water supply, these challenges are growing more complex and more expensive. One little example that really hasn't received the attention that it deserves is the fact that we are slowly medicating the population because people are disposing of prescription drugs by flushing them down the toilet. This is an extraordinarily troubling development because it's very hard to get these chemicals out of the system and they're showing up in the tests of the population across the country, that dozens of these drugs are in detectable quantities in people walking around. It is a wide array of challenges that have a significant impact on human health and on economic health and vitality that are only going to get worse as time goes on.

### **An Explosion of Bicycling Around the Country**

Literally from coast to coast, people are rediscovering the most efficient form of urban transportation ever invented. We see over fifty bike share programs that extend that cycling experience in a very convenient way to the general public. We look at aggressive efforts of safe routes to school so children can walk and bike safely and relieve parents from the obligation of having a double commute in the morning. It's big business. There are over 200 businesses in Portland, Oregon that deal with cycling. We're watching the bicycle be part of affordability for housing. Every attractive urban center is challenged by affordable housing, congestion. Increasing the bicycle mode split is a way that reduces demands on the roadway and it is an affordable option as opposed to investing \$10,000 a year for a car. Yesterday I helped cut a ribbon on the largest bike valet service in North America: 800 bicycles in a new development in Portland's Near East Side. It replaces the other previous largest bike valet program which was on the other side of the river in Portland of over 400 bikes. What we're finding in Brooklyn, Washington D.C., and Portland is that the bicycle is something that is attractive to these young, well-educated millennials that every community wants to help with their economic and cultural revitalization. It was fascinating to me to observe Houston, Texas, which has been sort of the antithesis of sound land use and balanced transportation—that former Mayor Annise Parker's last successful reelection campaign, the achievement that gained her the most support from Houstonians was her successful leadership in the passage of a \$200 million bond measure dedicated to cycling.

### **Education Is the Key to Public Support**

I think that is probably the single most important public policy challenge we face: having people understand the status, condition of existing infrastructure and the role that will be played by an aggressive program to rebuild and renew America. It is the fastest way to

create literally millions of family-wage jobs from coast to coast. It protects human health and environmental quality. I would hope that we could collectively do a better job of highlighting these issues. If I had my way, every single congressional district across the country would host a forum that would include the men and women who build, manage, construct, and operate America's infrastructure. There is an amazing coalition that is available. When I introduced the first gas-tax increase in 24 years I was joined by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the AFL-CIO, environmentalists, engineers, construction trades, and construction companies. We had both the truckers and AAA as the trucking and auto driving communities saying, "Raise our fees so that we can get this system right." I think there is a huge coalition on all our infrastructure that we need to assemble to be part of conversations that need to occur in every community. It's not particularly headline grabbing unless there's a system failure, but it is past time that we force this issue in every community. There is no substitute for engaging people in a very specific analysis of what happens in their own backyard and what the benefits are for getting this right.

### **Reason to Be Optimistic About Future Policies**

I'm seeing the pieces coming together. I'm seeing more action in metropolitan areas around the country. The transportation bill we passed last year is maybe a C- but it did give us another 4 and a half years of stability that we can use to build on. Growing awareness out of crises for water, sewer, lead—all of these come together at a time when we're going to turn the page for a new administration. I think you're going to get a better Congress. And this is an area that does not have to be partisan, if we can build on some of the recent momentum. We're seeing the advocates much better organized and articulate, and our bridging that gap to deal with individual citizens around the country puts us in a position, after the first of the year, to be able to make some significant progress if we all do our part.

**[www.InfrastructureUSA.org](http://www.InfrastructureUSA.org)  
212.414.9220  
[info@infrastructureusa.org](mailto:info@infrastructureusa.org)**