

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Congressman Peter DeFazio, U.S. Representative for Oregon's 4th District

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

The Bipartisan Maze of Infrastructure Funding

Unfortunately, we don't have capital budgets and the hardline republicans look at every dollar spent as the same. If we spend a dollar for fuel to put into a vehicle that's consumed, that's an operating cost; they count that exactly the same as a dollar spent to build a bridge that would last 100 years. We've come a long way from the Tea Party folks in '10. A whole bunch of them came onto the Transportation Committee and they wanted to devolve all of transportation to the states and do away with the federal role. They've been educated substantially; there's still, I think, about 70 or 80 devolutionists in the Republican caucus who believe that despite the fact that the post roads are mentioned in the constitution that the government has no authority or duty to invest in the national system of transportation and better be done by the 50 states and territories assembled. I point out to them with a poster I have which shows the brand new Kansas turnpike ending in Amo Schweitzer's farm field at the Oklahoma border, that we tried that in the 1950s. It didn't work! If you want to have an integrated national system there needs to be a strong federal role. Dwight David Eisenhower gave us the National Highway Plan and a user fee and it worked great. Unfortunately there is now both confusion over the value of the investment—we need to keep educating people on that—and then secondly there's just an ideological objection to any kind of user fee or increase. The Speaker does say “Well, gee, maybe in the future we could look at vehicle miles traveled,” but he blows off that we need money now, blows off the fact that we actually are borrowing money now. They're taking the biggest chunk of money out of a digital account held by the Federal Reserve—money that the Federal Reserve made up on a computer—and we're taking that money to spend on infrastructure on and on and on instead of confronting the fact that we haven't raised the gas tax since 1993, and that was bipartisan at that point. I remember Bud Shuster beating up his Republican colleagues—and rolling them—with bringing 60, 70 votes from the Republican side, working with the democrats to increase the user fee under the Clinton administration.

Congress Needs More Pressure to Solve the Problem

I can go to virtually any community in my district—and our infrastructure is in better shape in Oregon than most of the country—and talk about the need to invest and the jobs we could create and how to make us more efficient. The most conservative chambers of Congress will say “yeah, you're right.” So there's a recognition, but most American people aren't focused on it. They're busy in their daily lives; they're worried about their job, they're worried about their kids' futures, they're worried about their retirement. The first thing on their mind when they get up every day isn't “Gee, America is falling apart and if only I pushed my representative or my senator maybe we could make these investments, put people back to work and be more competitive as a nation.”

We have a representative democracy and there isn't that much pressure being put on members, and in fact there's a lot of members who are scared to death of raising the gas tax. I even just proposed "Let's index it." I said this in committee: "Raise your hand if you think that gas went up 1.5 cents a gallon next year, you'd lose your election?" Nobody raised their hand. In fact 11 republican states have raised their state gas tax either at the pump or at a wholesale level and there've been no recalls, no lost elections, no public outcry. It's just something the American people think their leaders will take care of and they're not. So I don't know how you generate a popular uprising around the issue of investing in infrastructure. I spent a lot of time trying to do it and sure I can get the manufacturers, I can get the interest groups, we can get everybody at the table we've even got the US Chamber of Commerce. But there's no pressure on the Congress to solve the problem.

Republican Support Is Growing

We have made progress. During the debate over the long-term surface transportation bill I kept throwing out ideas, and I had a number of Republicans say to me "Look, I'm not going to cosponsor your idea or your bill but if you can get it on the floor I'll vote for it." And I think that's the reality here. The leaders of the Republican Party here think they're protecting their members against something that they don't need to protect them against, which is an honest vote to invest in rebuilding our infrastructure. Remember, I was on the floor for two days with Bill Shuster when we did the surface transportation bill. There were a couple dozen amendments that were proposed for various ways of funding, including bipartisan amendments, and not a single one of them was allowed a vote. I think they weren't allowed a vote because Republican leadership was scared to death one of them might pass. So our problem is really at the top in the Republican Party here, an absolute denial that we need this and that it would be good for the country and the American people and probably not bad for their party, either.

Clinton or Trump, There's Hope for the Future

We may get another opportunity with Hillary or even with Mr. Trump, and I hope that congress takes advantage of it, and I'm going to be pushing as hard as I can for the biggest investment. I think she has spoken strongly to the idea that we need to invest in our infrastructure, to become more competitive in the world economy, to be more efficient here at home in terms of moving our people and our goods, and actually it can help with climate change and wasted fuel. There's nothing bad to say about making these investments, and actually I believe that Donald Trump has also made some pretty strong statements about infrastructure, so maybe there's a bipartisan agreement there and maybe if that becomes a topic during the presidential it will create a space for the next Congress no matter who's president to actually go there. I opposed the so-called Stimulus Bill. I went to chairman Oberstar and I said "Jim, look—you know there's very little in this for infrastructure. We've got to kill this bill and make them come back with something that doesn't spend \$400 billion on 12-dollar-a-week tax cuts that won't put anybody back to work and won't do anything permanently for the economy, and let's put a couple hundred billion into rebuilding America. Maybe let's rebuild all the bridges." I think, and I've had John Mica say to me, "You know, if you had prevailed in that argument you guys would probably still be in the majority today." Huge mistake by

Obama and my party leadership, one of the stupidest things they've ever done to go along with that Rube Goldberg stimulus instead of real jobs for real people that would provide an example that government can do things right and make Americans' lives better. We may get another chance after this presidential election and I hope we don't blow it again.

Citizens Need to Push Representatives for Infra

They need to speak up, speak out. They need to contact their members of congress, their senators. They need to particularly weigh in in an election year and, go to a debate, or ask them a question as publicly as you can, "what are you going to do to fix Americas infrastructure?" And put people back to work and restore this country as a leader in the world in infrastructure as opposed to someone who's crashing toward the bottom as it decays more quickly than we're repairing it. So I really think that we just have to turn this into an election-year issue and the more people speak out the safer it becomes for people who are on the margin here saying "Gee I don't know if I could vote for that 1.5-cent gas tax increase with indexation" to suddenly say "What the hell, nobody's going to notice that! Exxon just raised it a dime because of a riot in Libya." So the American people, I think, will accept prudent increases in user fees with the idea that their commutes are going to get better. Look at California. In LA, in that disastrous year of '08 the mayor put through an initiative to raise the sales tax and it went overwhelmingly to make massive investments to get people out of sitting in congestion, give them transit options, and it's working. We've shown these things can work if we have the money and the will.

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