

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Low Standards Are the New Normal

The issue is huge. It's probably one of the largest issues we have facing us, but it appears that we can't get much traction. By that I mean I think that the public and government officials feel as though infrastructure isn't as critical as it used to be back 20, 25 years ago. When you drive on our interstate highways people don't expect to have the smoothest ride, the most comfortable ride. They'll put up with defects in the pavement, they'll put up with bridge deterioration, where before, and in other countries, transportation is expected to be in very good condition. There's always an issue that's negative that has to turn out to be a positive thing that we need to repair. It's never a proactive approach. You just don't see this situation in Europe. When you're traveling Europe you see the roads are better, everything in the infrastructure—It's because people expect the government to do these things. And here I think we have a new normal. The expectation has really decreased, and there's a new normal that the expectations are lower.

We're Too Easy on Our Government

From an economic point of view, the longer we wait the more expensive it is to rebuild our roads, bridges, our airports, our railroads, our riverine structures, our ports and harbors. The longer we wait, the more expensive it is. I think that what used to drive things were that it was an expectation that it was a government duty to provide transportation not only for the traveling public but also for the goods that we transport. It was a government responsibility to do that, and I think people have lightened up on that, and government hasn't followed through.

Gas Tax Revenue Leads to Real Improvements

I think what you see where you have local communities that have a penny or a two-penny gallon tax on fuel, with the money generated from that surcharge they're doing their own public works projects, and they're earmarking them for specific projects. By that I mean the projects are planned out with the idea of collecting so much revenue off the increase in fuel tax locally. And they're getting things done and I can see that in our own town of Springfield, Illinois, where we've added a one-cent sales tax to fuel, and we've been having an upgrade in our roadways, our sidewalks, our bridges—all locally—but they were all earmarked for that purpose. And when people see that that progress is being made, they are more accepting of the additional costs.

Millennials and Cars: A Different Outlook

Take a look at millennials: how many millennials want to own a house? How many millennials are interested in a car when they can take Uber wherever they need to go? I think that's a whole different type of new normal, even when you take a look at driverless cars. When we grew up it was a part of passage where you wanted to get a car, you wanted to have a car that you really liked. I don't see that nowadays. I don't see people that are that interested, especially in the larger cities. It's more of a problem; it's more of a nuisance; it's just a way of getting around. And all that causes is less vehicles to be purchased and different modes of transportation, where millennials are more adept at taking public transportation than we were. I think it's a different outlook.

We Need to be Open to New Transportation Tech

I think a good mindset would be to have a very open mind, and push yourself past your comfort zone, and think futuristic as opposed to what's happening right now. For instance, this whole issue of driverless cars: I think that's a very interesting perspective, and how just using that as an example, how that could change our country completely. Look at the types of projects it would affect in our business, in civil engineering. Roadways would be designed perhaps differently: would you need parking spaces on a roadway that's inside of a city? Would you need parking garages? Would you have some other way of staging the vehicles? Would you own a car? And think about all the other people that would be perhaps disabled that wouldn't be able to drive a car, or even to the extent where people were blind. They wouldn't have a concern about getting from point A to point B because some vehicle would take them. You could have kids being taken to school without their parents being next to them. There are all kinds of changes and I think people just need to look forward and embrace change and be open to it. Be very open to it. We don't have to look around. There are plenty of things going on right here in the United States if we just have an open mind and push forward.

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