

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**John Kissinger, President and CEO, Graef-USA**

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

### **Infrastructure: The Big Picture**

Everybody knows it's a problem that needs to be dealt with, but they all think it's somebody else's responsibility to resolve it. I think there's a growing consensus that infrastructure problems need resolution and that spending on infrastructure would be a good thing. I don't know if it's just a matter of time, or something dramatic needs to happen. It's certainly making us less competitive, unfortunately. We had a big advantage in infrastructure for a long while and in some ways still do as a nation, but some of the infrastructure aged and other economies have risen in more recent years and have more modern infrastructure. Then, obviously, we haven't made the commitment to it as a society that we used to, in large part because other social needs have taken a larger piece of the pie.

### **Other Social Issues Have Taken Precedence**

I think, philosophically, roads and probably defense are two bedrock government functions, and you can debate a lot of others, but I don't think there's a lot of debate on that. Because we had such a robust infrastructure, I think that other problems were more pressing. You know, if you get into a deferred-maintenance situation with anything, whether it's your house, or your car or any capital good, it gets out of hand after a while. I think as engineers sometimes things just seem very logical—this would seem very logical to take care of this infrastructure that there was such a large investment in to begin with—but there are a lot of emotional and political reasons why that doesn't happen, and they tend to get discounted. I think the people who are interested in improving infrastructure need to understand that, and try to respond to that rather than dismiss it as illogical or something along those lines.

### **Are Engineers Honest?**

Engineers have tried to play, and ideally they would play, the role of the honest broker that's just giving people the information that could be relied upon to tell people where things really stand. ASCE has their report card, and I see it widely quoted in the press. I think there's lack of trust in all institutions, and I do see more than when I maybe started in the business--people thinking, "Well, this is just a lobbying group like every other one that's trying to feather their nest," but I think the engineers in general, and ASCE in particular, tries to play that role of an honest broker that's just analyzing and reporting on the problem. I think a lot of the problem I see at the state level and even at the federal level is everybody agrees that there needs to be repair of infrastructure, but you have a group that's kind of like the tea party group that says, "Well, if you just got rid of the waste, fraud and corruption there'd be plenty of money to fix everything," and then you have the other group that says, "We just need more money. We don't have enough

money being spent on this." So they both tell you, "I'm trying to solve the problem," but they can't reach any kind of accommodation between themselves. So I go to DC, or I go to the state House and I talk about transportation, or I talk about wastewater, or I talk about FAA, and everybody agrees it needs to be solved, but they have a different philosophy on what the solution is.

### **Citizen Action: Understanding Before Engaging**

I don't know why people put up with all the time spent in traffic, or all the quality-of-life issues related to that. We've all been to the doctor but we really don't know what a sewage treatment plant looks like, or what to do about traffic. It's a good question. Why don't people offer their opinions so freely? I say that if you talk to people about a lot of things, some people will talk about it and others are quiet. But if you talk to people about dieting, everybody will give you advice because everybody at some point in their life has been on a diet, it seems. So there are certain things that people have a personal connection with. A lot of infrastructure, obviously, is unseen. You flip the switch and the light goes on, or you turn the tap and the water goes on, and you just don't make the connection about all of the complexity that has to go in just to make those things happen, but traffic is fairly straightforward. Maybe because it's always been that way in their experience. It's an important quality-of-life issue that people just for whatever reason can't seem to wrap their head around.

### **Our Generational Responsibility**

When I talk here in our local community I will often say, you know, "Our forefathers built the public museum, the zoo, the freeway system, the transportation system, and we benefit from that." What have we done along those lines, and what's our responsibility to future generations? When you look back in history, whether it's way back in history when people were filling in swamps with shovels to develop the city, or just 50 years ago when they were creating the Interstate System or the sewage treatment, or 20 years ago when they were doing the deep tunnel here. I think it's up to every generation to do something, and I think current generations have maybe fallen down a little bit there because they've had other priorities to spend the money on. I don't know that it's the fault of the millennials or the fault of the baby boomers, but definitely I think our generation has to look and say, "Well, we benefit from these things that have been done by previous generations, whether it's the electric grid that was done 100 years ago, or the interstate freeway that was done 50 years ago, or the internet that was done 30 years ago, and we need to leave something behind." Maintenance is never as easy as building new things anyway, so that's part of the problem as well; a lot of these systems that we built just need maintenance and that's a little harder to get people behind.

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