

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Congresswoman Dina Titus (D-NV 1st District)

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Trump's Infrastructure Plan: Smoke and Mirrors

Originally when he was talking about infrastructure, people got pretty excited because some of us had wanted more infrastructure spending way back to get us out of the recession and thought, "Well, this would be an opportunity to be bipartisan." But the more we heard and the more that they explained it wasn't really going to be an investment—it was kind of smoke and mirrors, it was bonding, it was public-private partnerships—the more we realized that it's not amounting to much. Because he didn't have anything to offer, and because the secretary couldn't explain anything, I think they just came up with something that had already been written by the chairman, and pushed by the chairman, and that was kind of an easy thing for him to offer. I think that people are disillusioned because they're not seeing a real investment. In fact, if you look at the budget that Trump put out, there are cuts in infrastructure: they're cutting the TIGER grants, they're cutting Amtrak, cutting several different funding programs that we've used in Nevada.

Privatization Just Doesn't Work

These public-private partnerships that they tout really don't work. We tried that in downtown Las Vegas to do the new Project Neon, and just couldn't generate enough revenue from the private sector, so we know that is not the "silver bullet." I'm opposed to privatizing government services, because then the priority shifts from service to profit, and that never works. If you talk about something like air traffic control, that's especially egregious because we have the safest system there is; we're going to now undermine that. They keep talking about copying Canada. Well, think of the difference between Canada and the number of airports and flights there compared to the United States and Britain, but they selectively pick out the things they want to compare. There are no guarantees for the workers there; they're turning over billions of dollars worth of equipment and infrastructure to a private corporation, and that corporation—or commission or counsel or whatever the hell they're going to call it—is going to be controlled by the airlines, and they don't have that good a record, frankly, for having things work on time and work efficiently and effectively.

Not the Year for Infrastructure

I'm not very optimistic; certainly not in this year. You've got the healthcare problem to resolve, you've got tax questions that they want to address, you've got all the foreign policy issues and all of that is overlaid by what's occupying everybody's time which are hearings with Sessions and Comey and McManus and you name it. So I'm not too optimistic this is going to move forward in any meaningful way. I'm a co-sponsor of a bill that will look at reforming the FAA short of privatizing air traffic controllers. We've introduced that as a counter to the chairman's FAA privatization bill and there's nothing scheduled for any of those hearings yet, or any kind of mark-ups, so even that's not moving very quickly.

Pushing for Infrastructure Engagement

Let's remember Eisenhower and the freeway system, what a difference that made, and then the investment in the railroads before that. It is what is good for quality of life as well as good for business. One of the good things that's happening with the new generation: a lot of them don't have cars, so they want to use mass transit, or they want to ride their bicycle, or there's more pedestrian traffic now. At least maybe they're realizing that infrastructure affects them directly, whereas in the past it was something that you just took for granted. We have town halls in my district. Right now, there are several major infrastructure issues that I hear about from Las Vegas. We depend on bringing people and products into the district, so there's talk about how are you going to build infrastructure around the new stadium for the Raiders; we need some light rail traveling around the valley. The people of Las Vegas were willing to index the gas tax to support infrastructure; they say, "Why don't we do that for the federal gas tax?" That hasn't been changed in how many years? Public input can make a big difference; that's one of the reasons I created that infrastructure caucus with Mr. Costello, so that we could try to harness some of that public sentiment, try to educate the public, try to remind our fellow members that you don't have to just be on the highway committee to be concerned about building infrastructure in your district. Plus, it's such a related thing to tourism: if you don't have good infrastructure, you can't maximize what your district might have to offer in terms of tourists, both getting them to your district and then moving them around in the district once they get there, and that's a big part of the economy in some areas as well.

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