

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Infra is Investment, Not Spending

Everybody agrees that something needs to be done, but we're still lagging behind and I don't see the urgency being placed or the investment happening. As I talk with different DOTs up and down the East Coast, they still look at it as spending money versus looking at it as an investment in our future, and that really has me concerned, especially from the political sense. This isn't an entitlement program where the money is going out and we're not getting any return; it's actually vital for us to be able to sustain our economic position and also to allow us to continue to grow. And that's where the stalemate comes. We need to see a mind-shift from spending money to investing in our future, and I don't see that happening. It's funny, I talked with some folks down in DC, with different members of the House and Senate, and they are starting to see that there's an investment in this and they are starting to hear from their constituents—but without the ability for earmarks, they still struggle about how that program can really get off the dime.

We Can't Wait for a New Financing Program

Just over the last few years, you see most states, and even counties and some municipalities, passing legislation that goes to improving their infrastructure. So folks aren't afraid of making the investments where they see improvements to take place, even in their quality of life. We have just about 40% of all of our bridges across the country are 40 years old or older, that are in need of major repair or replacement. That just keeps us where we are. And people recognize that we need to not only fix it, but we need to continue to make expansions. I commend the Administration for talking about a trillion dollars, but right now they're only talking about putting \$200 billion of public money up and the rest coming from other sources in the private sector. And while there've been some successes of that in this country as well as overseas, I don't think we can afford to wait for a financing program to fully mature before we make significant infrastructure investments. It has to be done now; the federal government has to recognize that they need to spend this money. They can't continue to hold the dollars hostage going forward. I'm very pleased that they put the money in the spending bill up to the *Fast Act* authorization levels, but at the same time they were doing that, they were rescinding un-obligated moneys from previous years, so it really isn't up to the *Fast Act* level. I don't think there'll be political fallout from asking for more money to pay for infrastructure improvements. I think where we struggle is the politicians, unless they can be assured that they're bringing the money to their home district. This is where, I believe, we need to get back to so that the politicians can have those earmarks to bring some money back to their own district. That's what's holding them back from doing the voting and making these tax improvements that are necessary. Because really without the earmarks, everything just goes to the Administration to make the decisions, and the members of the opposing parties or different regional areas have no way of assuring that the moneys are going to go back to their constituents. They're reluctant to do it, and I think if we brought back earmarks and allowed the congressmen and senators to bring some of the money home, they would vote for increases in spending.

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More Transparency, Better Communication and Increased Public Involvement

I believe that greater civic engagement and a larger dialogue would be helpful. I think it needs to be up-front and needs to be really robust, and the transportation agencies need to be a lot more transparent so they can build that level of trust with the public and thereby get the support that they need. And then that will allow for projects to move forward more efficiently. Lots of times when there's not that public engagement, projects do get hung up, and you end up going back and revisiting things because the agencies weren't as transparent as they should've been. In my experience working on major corridor-enhancement-type projects, when we have been out there in the public having the conversations, people want to do the right thing and they will coalesce around what the right thing is if they believe that they are a part of the process. If they believe that the government is just trying to ram something down their throat, they will fight, and it holds us back from doing the things that we need to do. They will engage and be very proactive in helping us get the funding approved, and will vote for initiatives if they believe that the agencies are going to spend the money in the right direction. To be quite honest, we need transportation advocates, and you're seeing them pop up all over the place to participate in these campaigns. When the funding campaigns fall apart—like in Massachusetts for example, they rescinded an automatic increase in the gas tax. That was because the public agency wasn't out there talking about the benefits of it, and it allowed the anti-government folks to really take the lead and kill that initiative. And it's going to cripple Massachusetts' ability to really progress, not only the fix-it-first projects or the maintaining projects, but to do those capacity enhancement projects that would allow that area of the country to stay economically viable. And it really came down to the fact that there wasn't an effective civic-engagement process led by either the public agency or by a significant transportation advocacy group.

VHB: Work and Process

VHB is an East Coast firm. We have 24 offices spread up and down the East Coast, from Maine all the way down to Florida. We are engaged primarily in six markets: transportation, real estate, energy, the federal market, state and local governments, are the primary markets. We do full-service engineering, planning and environmental services. We are engaged in projects at a real local level for developers, up to projects of national significance for major DOT's and for the federal government. We tend to get into projects in the very early phases, in the planning and environmental review process, through design and into construction. So we do the full gamut; we're a full-service engineering and planning firm.

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