

InfrastructureUSA

Robert Yaro, President, Regional Plan Association
Interviewed by Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA
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Robert Yaro On:

Civic engagement and infrastructure issues:

I think part of it is that [infrastructure] is out of sight, out of mind so much that people flip on the light switch and they just assume that somebody's taking care of it or they flush the toilet and assume that someone's taking care of it. I think the thing that people have the most personal contact with in the infrastructure front is on the highways and on the transit systems. People live with congestion and terrible pavement and all the rest of it and then they think "well, there's nothing I can do about it," or "it's just the way it is," you know, "this is handed down to us by our forefathers and there's nothing we can do about it." And then I think, also, we've been spoiled. Our grandparents and parents and great-grand parents that built these systems and so forth, and this whole generation of Americans has just lived off the dividends, all of us baby-boomers. It's been a hell of a party, and the party's over. And there's still this great focus on private wealth and public poverty. I guess, most people are much more interested in getting a bigger flat-panel TV than they are in improving the interstate or the transit system that they use every day.

Catalyzing civic engagement:

I've devoted the last twenty years of my life to making civic engagement work here in New York. We need to keep pushing, and I think there are a number of ways to make this happen. We need to deal with citizens; we need to deal with the civic leadership and the business leadership. We've got to work through elites from the top down, and the grassroots from the bottom up, and maybe we'll get there. One of the things we need to do is we need to translate these issues in terms of people's daily lives. This cannot be an arcane or technical discussion about failing pipes or smart grids or something like that. People need to understand that it's going to improve their quality of life, that it's going to improve their livelihoods, that it's going to create a foundation for the country and the economy that their kids are going to inherit, but it's got to be in terms of people's daily lives or it's not going anywhere.

There are so many other things that are out there that the American public is worried about. [Infrastructure] has taken a back seat to climate and to healthcare, certainly, and it's not – I don't want to say it isn't on the agenda of the Obama administration -- it is, but it's down the list, and it isn't going to make it to the top of the list unless the American people start demanding it. So I think what

you're doing is part of the solution. We're certainly working on it. There are dozens of other groups that are trying to elevate this issue into something that the government needs to address sooner rather than later. But you know, I think we need to make the connections to the things that the people do care about. They're worried about their jobs and this is about creating new jobs, they're worried about the climate and the future of the planet, and this is about the future of the planet; this is about reducing greenhouse gases, and so forth. They're worried about their commute to work, and this is about improving their commute to work, and all of the above. We have to, again, tie it back to the things that people care about. Too much of the discussion has been an inside-ball type of discussion: it hasn't really reached the public in the way that it needs to.

Congestion pricing:

We know [congestion pricing] works, we accept it in every other aspect of our lives. You pay in your power, in your electric bill, you pay more in periods of scarcity at the food store for things that are scarce and, you know, you pay more for blueberries this time of year than you do in summertime, for example. Well, why is that? Because there are fewer blueberries in the northern hemisphere. Everybody accepts that, and then you talk about pricing access to the highways and you say "that's my birthright to drive whenever I want, wherever I want without paying for it." Then you sit in traffic for half an hour or forty-five minutes and, you know, people are not able to make these connections. So I think, some of it is we've just got to grow up and we've got to get used to the fact that we're in a new world.

High-speed rail and global competitiveness:

Morocco is building its first high-speed rail line between Tangiers and Casablanca, the first of several of these things. This is a country with a GDP that's half the size of Connecticut's, and they're moving ahead with it. So, we're behind virtually the entire rest of the industrialized, and now some of the industrializing, world on this thing. If we don't get serious, and we are--you know, the Obama administration has moved high-speed rail farther in 8 months than it had been moved in the past 30 years--but we've got to keep going. The 8 billion dollars in the stimulus legislation is a down payment on what's going to cost ultimately hundreds of billions of dollars to build a high-speed rail network. But we've got to keep moving on this stuff or the rest of the world is going to leave us in the dust. I think people need to understand that it's not the only thing we need to remain competitive in the global economy, but it's one of the big things we need to do. So, I think you add up all these reasons and eventually the American public will always...you know, the old Winston Churchill quip about how you can depend on the Americans to do the right thing after they've exhausted all the other possibilities, and that's kind of where we are, I think, kind of running out of other possibilities.

The politics of infrastructure repair:

Our hope is that the president, who is obviously one of the great communicators of his age, that when he gets...and they're being very strategic about the way they're handling things. They realize that they can't get the congress to act on everything all at once and so they've got this queue that begins with the healthcare business and probably climate change and energy after that, and possibly this issue after that. The hope is once we get there...unfortunately things are so poisoned in Washington. The politics and the partisanship and so forth are so poisonous, and this has always been a bipartisan issue going back to Dwight Eisenhower's day, or probably going back to George Washington's day it's been a bipartisan issue and we need to keep it there. There's no Republican or Democratic way to fix potholes.

Robert D. Yaro is the President of Regional Plan Association, America's oldest independent metropolitan policy, research and advocacy group. Mr. Yaro co-chairs the Empire State Alliance and the Friends of Moynihan Station, and is Vice President of the Forum of Urban Design. He serves on Mayor Bloomberg's Sustainability Advisory Board, which helped prepare PlaNYC 2030, New York City's new long-range sustainability plan. Since 2001 Mr. Yaro has been Professor of Practice in City and Regional Planning at the University of Pennsylvania. He also taught at Harvard University and the University of Massachusetts.

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