

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Kate Slevin:

Infra investments

I think that we absolutely have to start thinking about how we're investing every dollar that we spend because we don't have a lot of money in recent years and the challenges facing our infrastructure generally are very, very daunting. Going forward, we're going to have to be very careful about how we invest our money. We invest it in the right projects in existing urban areas, existing towns and villages that we're not allowing new roads to be built to new developments in the middle of nowhere that are just going to further increase our congestion problem and that we're really embracing a smart growth strategy at the national and state level and not just at a local level.

Positive change in the NY/NJ/CT Tri-State area

There's been a lot of progress. I've been there since 2002 and just in the time since I've been there we've seen a lot of positive changes in our region. One thing, most notably, that's happened is New Jersey is spending its transportation money very wisely. It's built a number of new rail lines. It's investing its highway and bridge money, almost all of it, in existing infrastructure. And there are a couple of big projects like the widening of the turnpike and the parkway toll roads that are on the books still and are being pursued but for the most part the New Jersey Department of Transportation has really become a leader in how to invest its transportation dollars wisely. So that's a big advance. In the mid-90s the agency was spending about fifty percent of its capital dollars on new highways that were leading to nowhere and encouraging sprawl. Today it's spending about five percent of that money. Now we hope that similar reform will come to the agency that owns the toll roads, the New Jersey Turnpike Authority, but at least we've seen some progress there. In New York City, we've seen tremendous changes just in the past couple years in the number of bike lanes and improvements in the way our streets look, public plazas, they really show that the streets aren't just for automobiles, they're for people. And they're meant to promote all modes of transportation, especially in urban areas. That's been excellent work all lead by the New York City Department of Transportation Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan. In Connecticut, we've had some progress on two new transit projects that have been stalled for about ten years and now they're being advanced and they have federal money and federal support.

Hopefully those will be a reality in the next couple of years. We have made a lot of progress and there's no shortage of challenges ahead, especially when it comes to funding. The MTA in New York just implemented a round of terrible service cuts and you talk to folks who have been in New York politics and they say this is the worst they've seen in about thirty years. We definitely have challenges there. The MTA finances aren't doing any better, they're getting worse. We're going to have to deal with that in the next couple of years. Overall, we're moving towards a more transit friendly region. Transit rider-ship has been booming in the past couple of decades. We've really invested more and more in our existing infrastructure on the highway and bridge side, encouraging more sustainable land use choices and a greener way of approaching transportation projects.

Preventing disasters

We have seen some pretty big disasters in the past couple years and some very near disasters. Agencies closing bridges because they're structurally unsound and catching it before the disaster struck – we're very lucky that the New York State DOT just destroyed a bridge the Champlain Bridge after they found that it was structurally unsound and no one could use it anymore. They closed it down and had to destroy it. But if they hadn't caught it, then who knows what would have happened and how many tragedies we would have seen as a result of that.

Infra debt

We definitely have some challenges ahead, especially on the funding side. We've taken out an incredible amount of debt to pay for transportation projects that we have underway now. That is further crippling our ability to pay for what we need to do today and in the future. On the funding side, the challenges are certainly immense. But, at the same time, we have started some pretty incredible transit projects in our region. We're building a new rail tunnel between New York and New Jersey. We're building a Second Avenue subway. We're building a new connection from Long Island and the east side of Manhattan. These are all incredible projects that we've dreamed of for years and they're actually being constructed and being built. But the truth of the matter is that a lot of the money that's paying for those projects is borrowed money and we're building in the now and we absolutely need them, but at the same time we're going to be making it harder for future generations to build what they need and to repair the existing infrastructure we have. It's sort of a mixed blessing. We're getting some good projects now that we absolutely need and absolutely have to build, but the increasing debt burden and our deteriorating infrastructure is really going to be a challenge in the next couple of decades.

Citizen anger

I think people are up in arms about congestion, and people are certainly right now up in arms about the transit cuts we're facing not only in our region but

across the country. You have people who have never been engaged in political issues before emailing governors and elected officials because they know that their fares are going up twenty-five percent and their transit service is being cut. At the same time, trains are more crowded than they ever have been. You are seeing an intense reaction. Whether or not the people in charge are listening or able to give the agencies the revenues that they need to stop those transit cuts from happening I think is a different story. On the congestion side, for years people have been up in arms about congestion in our region and I think actually a lot of folks are interested in transit because of that. As the transit system became more reliable in New York, for example, you saw incredible growth in transit ridership. People were just waiting to get back on the subway because they were sick of being in their cars. I think you are seeing some pretty strong reactions to these problems. I think it will be a lesson in years to come especially as you see more and more infrastructure going into a state of disrepair and hopefully we won't see this, but if we don't do something about it we are going to see it, more tragedies like the one we saw in Minneapolis and the almost tragedy we saw with the Champlain Bridge in New York.

High-speed rail, but maintenance too

I think high-speed rail is an excellent investment and we're strong supporters of anything that has the potential to improve connections between cities and reinvigorate urban areas that haven't seen the transportation investment they deserve is worthy. At the same time, overly focusing on high-speed rail when we have a serious transit crisis on our hands now with the current system is a little misguided. We're seeing subway and bus service cuts all across the country, we're seeing infrastructure that's not safe to drive on and we're seeing transit fares go up everywhere. We can't maintain and keep the operations of our existing system at the level they are today without a significant increase investment. We can't just focus on a new high-speed rail system or even a system that expands on what we have. We absolutely have to fix the existing system and ensure that we have the subway and bus and commuter rail service and Amtrak service that people want. While we are strong supporters of high-speed rail and we're so pleased that this is a new announcement we don't think that it's going to solve all of our problems and we think that the existing infrastructure is really in need of increased attention, especially on the operating side.

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