

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Hilary Shelton:

Infrastructure is a civil rights issue

The NAACP sees this as a major priority. It indeed is a civil rights issue. It's an access to opportunity for millions of Americans, Americans who were left out of the equation altogether, but giving them the opportunity to do what is part of the American dream: to transcend your present condition and be able to find a brighter future, are being given the proper tools to move from stage to stage. The NAACP sees transportation infrastructure as an absolute priority, and we work on it for so many reasons and to address so many issues in our communities. It is an absolute priority.

Transportation infra is crucial to low-income communities

It's crucial. It's one of the biggest problems that poor and disadvantaged communities have. They don't have the infrastructure to be able to seamlessly get to work, to school, to their businesses, and even around the city to take care of their family business. Infrastructure is key. We have seen the difference in communities in which there is very little public transportation infrastructure going into what become very isolated, poor, racial and ethnic minority communities; and those that are part of a vital, seamless transportation infrastructure that allows people to get around and take care of all their business, from work and school to church, shopping and everything else, that's so important. When you're talking about poor people you're also talking about people who don't own cars, who don't have their own mode of transportation and are dependent on public transportation to get just about everywhere. So it is important that we have an infrastructure policy and blueprint in place that helps empower communities by providing them with just that kind of robust, comprehensive transportation infrastructure.

Job creation

We haven't talked about the jobs that it creates in and of itself. Those jobs to both drive the infrastructure, to build out the infrastructure, and to maintain that infrastructure. Whether you're talking about light rail, whether we're talking about a more robust bus system—building shelters and sheds for those passengers that are riding and maintaining that—that's all job creation. All that is so very

important, not to mention the train engineers that go along with it, or bus drivers, or light rail operators, maintenance people, and everything else that also creates—and in most cases, what we're talking about under these circumstances is we're talking about union, living-wage jobs. That's crucial. Jobs that will pay a living wage, that will allow people to take care of their families, that provide healthcare insurance, a pension plan and other things that are fundamental to the American working class in our society. So it's key. It's absolutely key.

Transit stops are good for business

Here in Washington, DC, as DC moved to put in place its light rail subway system there were initially parts of town that were fearful that if they put in subway stops in their commercial areas that it was going to bring the wrong element of people there. But when they saw the reality of all the business that was brought into those areas that were conveniently located at those subway stops, that created new hubs of commerce right here in the city, business people expanded their business exponentially. It's still growing here as we see how strategically important it is for us to put those stops in all the right places, those transfer lines in places that also create a robust business community. All those things are just so very important that we're moving in this direction. There are so many levels to the importance of well-planned transportation infrastructure that we're just beginning to scratch the surface. It makes such a big difference in developing communities.

The comprehensive effect infra has on a community

When we watch how jobs flowed in our society—when I was growing up, jobs were flowing out of the inner-city area, and into the suburban area. The challenge was that there was not a transportation infrastructure to move city people to those job sites out in the suburban area, and only those who had cars were able to reach it. What that meant was that it became very difficult to transcend your economic condition, if indeed you couldn't even get to work to make the money to improve your family, to improve your personal life. So, it's amazing what a domino effect a good, robust transportation infrastructure can have on communities, families and individuals.

It needs to be seen as more than just a place that the bus stops, or the new light rail system that no one's using. It really needs to be viewed in that multi-dimensional manner in which it affects our communities. Again, commerce: we have to talk about it in terms of commerce itself. Job creation, increasing opportunities for kids to get a better education because they have a transit system that allows them to get to the school, that provides the kind of expertise that they're looking for: the kind of concentration and the subject matter. When we talk about it in those real terms people get more excited about it, but when all we're talking about is where the bus stop goes, people don't necessarily see just how important it is, especially if you're someone who does not normally use the

bus. Planning those things very well actually gives the opportunity to do all of the above, so I think it is so important that we have a much more in-depth and human conversation about how transportation infrastructure affects all of our lives.

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