

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steven C.F. Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Brian Depew:

The Center for Rural Affairs

The Center for Rural Affairs is based in rural northeast Nebraska. We work both in Nebraska and throughout the Midwest and great plains and out across the entire nation on a whole series of issues that matter to rural communities, matter to family farmers, small business owners. You can find out more about us on our website as well, which is cfra.org.

The infra crisis in rural America

In rural America, infrastructure is a big issue here, too. Some of the things that come immediately to mind are broadband infrastructure, and also infrastructure for cell phone access; we have inadequate broadband infrastructure in rural America and inadequate cell phone service in rural America. Those are two things we need major investment in. Some other things come to mind, sort of private infrastructure issues. Things around grocery stores in rural communities, healthy food access, those are also sort of infrastructure questions.

And when you start talking about all three of the things I just mentioned, they fall most heavily on those who are least well-off in rural communities. If you look at broadband, for example, about 60% of people in rural America have access to broadband. That's less than urban America, but the access numbers actually obscure some of the larger issues, one of them being the speed of that broadband, but the other being the affordability. Sometimes you have access, but in rural America the service you might have access to, is considerably more expensive in part because of the technology, and in part because there's less competition because there's less infrastructure.

Broadband infrastructure could provide opportunities and new employment, new businesses; it could be based on broadband. But it's actually about more than just business development: it's about basic things like access to news and information in this country, how we interact with public institutions and elected officials, and if rural people are left out of that they're at a disadvantage.

Smart investments create jobs

Not only does it create immediate jobs in building out our infrastructure in rural communities, but it also creates the economic base for new jobs that can come about as a result of that investment in infrastructure so it's sort of a double one-two punch in that regard. Also, another thing comes to mind is our electricity-generation infrastructure in this country, and the great need to build out our clean energy infrastructure, another place where big investment now could provide jobs that give the economy a lift and also set us on the right path to clean, renewable energy in this country.

Engaging citizens by talking about what matters to them

That's exactly one of the things we do at the Center for Rural Affairs. Reach out and engage every day rural people in these public national policy debates. And I can tell you, from hands on experience, that some of these infrastructure questions – we don't talk about them as infrastructure questions. We talk about broadband access, we talk about cell phone access, we talk about renewable electricity generation, those are some of the hottest topics in these communities and rural people are certainly interested, engaged in that, and need a seat at the policy debate about these topics.

I think that some of these questions are right for community engagement, and they really hit home for people. They're driving down the road and they try to use their cell phone and it drops the call; they start to understand and start to make those connections. And also on renewable energy, it's about jobs and their communities. I'll give you an example: We held a forum in Scotts Bluff, Nebraska, about wind energy and western Nebraska, and we had over 90 – close to 100 – people show up. All stripes, all political affiliations, all interested in how we improve and invest in wind energy in the western part of Nebraska. And I guarantee if we had a meeting out there about broadband policy, the same thing – maybe even more people.

Infrastructure needs for rural vs. urban communities

That's certainly a concern, and infrastructure needs in rural communities will be different than the needs in urban communities and it's important we don't try to write a "one size fits all" policy – but instead recognize that in urban areas we should be investing in things like high-speed rail, whereas in rural areas we should be investing in things like wind turbines, and adequate broadband access.

It's really important that when we're talking about national investment and infrastructure that we're investing in both rural infrastructure and urban infrastructure, and that those investments are appropriate. That we're investing the type of infrastructure that we need to develop our economies, and develop

our communities, and allow rural people to be as much a part of the public debate as urban people are.

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