

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

David Foster, Executive Director, BlueGreen Alliance

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

David Foster

Building 21st Century Infrastructure

The BlueGreen Alliance is a strategic partnership of eight of America's largest unions and four of its most influential environmental organizations. Together we have almost 14 million members. We touch virtually every community in America, and we're bound together by a common vision that we don't need to pick between a good job and clean environment in the 21st century. In fact, we believe that you'll get both or neither. So we believe strongly that the best way to solve America's current economic problems is by stepping up and solving our biggest environmental challenges. We can put America back to work with good jobs building 21st century transportation infrastructure: by cleaning up our dilapidated water systems, by building an efficient smart grid to move electricity around the country from where we produce it cleanly to where we need to consume it and do it in the most efficient way possible. So, there's an awful lot of work to be done, leaving the 19th century infrastructure behind that we still have in so many of America's cities and replacing it with the 21st century infrastructure that we need to compete in a clean energy 21st century economy.

We've Got the Skills; We Just Lack the Wills. Now Is the Best Time to Build!

The American Society of Civil Engineers has given our overall infrastructure a D rating—not too good. Our main economic competitors in Europe and China spend 2-3 times as much per year respectively as we do on their infrastructure improvements. That's the challenge. Now the good news is that I think we're living in a period of unprecedented cheap money, which means there's never been a better time in America to go out and borrow money or bond-issue local, municipal, or state bonds to fund big infrastructure projects. We'll never be able to do it cheaper. We've got a big job in front of us, but let's get about doing it. Of course, the other big advantage right now is that we've got over a million skilled construction workers who are out pounding the pavement looking for work. So we're not going to be hamstrung by not having enough skilled workers to go out and do these projects. They're waiting to be done, the money is cheap, people want to work, and I don't know about you, but I'm tired of busting my tie rods and tires on potholes in the streets I drive to and from in my home state of Minnesota. I think most Americans feel that way; we just need to put this issue in front of them in a clear, compelling, graphic way: that we've got the means, we've got the skills, we just lack the wills.

May, 2012

It's about National Security and Economic Competitiveness

We take things for granted that tie us together as a community; that's a great failure. I find it chilling frankly, when I've traveled outside of the United States, and whether it's been in Europe, or in South Africa, or parts of Asia, to find the condition of roads and highways far better in countries with half the per capita income than we do in this country, and yet their basic infrastructure is now surpassing ours. Those are the kinds of things that lead a country and a society down the path to disaster. You become noncompetitive. It's exactly on the backbone of those kinds of big infrastructure and education projects that countries and economies become competitive. So we can't lose that edge. And it's a message that I think Americans respond to very strongly when they hear it's about national security and economic competitiveness. It's not about big government; it's not about bloated spending programs. It's about doing together the things that have always made our country great.

Taking Responsibility

It's really going back to some basic American values about not being wasteful, taking care of what you have so that you'll be able to do better tomorrow. I'm surprised when people complain about basic virtues that went into building this country when we think about things like energy efficiency, for instance, in our built environment. Recently I had a conversation with the CEO of Honeywell, one of our major electronics and energy efficiency managers and manufacturers, and he told me that if we universally applied the technology that Honeywell produces and sells today in the United States, we could cut America's energy consumption in its buildings by 20-25% across the board. Now there's nothing to be proud of, that we're wasting energy to that extent, that we're just blowing BTUs out of leaky roofs and windows. That's not the sort of thing the America I grew up in was taught to be proud of. We're taught to waste not, want not. And those are exactly the problems we should be proud to solve not turning our heads away from and ignoring.

A Shared Vision

The BlueGreen Alliance likes to take a problem like wastewater infrastructure and analyze it, point out to the American people that our wastewater management systems in many cases are well over a hundred years old; they're leaking and wasteful. There's never been a better time to attack the problem of reconstructing and refinancing them. Cheap money, available labor, solve our environmental and unemployment problems all at the same time. These are the kinds of issues we like to do broad-based public education about, get our union and environmental partners working together. People's eyes light up when they see people as different as union members and environmental activists standing side-by-side, saying, "we have a lot more in common and a shared vision. Let's get out as Americans and fix the problem." That's what people like to hear and that's what we like to do.

**www.InfrastructureUSA.org
212.414.9220
info@infrastructureusa.org**

May, 2012