

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

John Robert Smith, President & CEO, Reconnecting America

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

John Robert Smith

The Current Transportation Bill: Slow, but Some Progress

Well, certainly, this is not a seismic shift in how we see transportation. It is not the visionary, interconnected series of transportation investments and choices that I want to see play out during the life of my grandson. But I do think we have to recognize the gains that have been made, and especially within the political context and the economic environment that we operate in. I do think there have been important wins in this bill, and even though it's short term, I think it sets the stage for a much more robust visionary discussion, debate, authorization, and appropriation for what will hopefully be a truly long-term bill. And, honestly that debate should start the morning after this bill is signed.

The Shah of Iran, Gas Prices and Lessons Not Learned

When the Shah fell you could not buy gasoline in this country after dark. There were lines wrapped around the block to buy gas. You literally didn't travel on the interstate at night because if you pulled off to get gas after 6:00pm it wasn't going to be available. I saw it remarkably change how people traveled that summer and fall, and I thought the country is going to understand how important not only transportation infrastructure is, but the resources that are needed, whether that's fossil fuels or other forms of energy to move citizens about. We're not a truly independent nation until we get that solved for ourselves. We saw what one nation's collapse could do to us, but we didn't learn from that, and we have not learned in other points of crisis. As soon as a crisis abates and the gas prices go down we go back to business and life as usual, and we have failed to tackle this issue that will continue to weigh on the economy and the productiveness of this country until we do. Certainly, when the bridge collapsed outside of Minneapolis, I thought we were going to now understand that we have not invested in just maintaining that which my parents' generation built for us. But I have seen signs that we are coming to grips with that.

Who Gets It?

Mayors across this country--red state, blue state, doesn't matter whether the mayor's republican or democrat--they understand the importance of investment in infrastructure, and the fact that they need a strong federal partner and a strong state partner, and that it is about being connected to the regional economy to be

globally competitive. So I know mayors get it; I know it is a number one priority in most cities in this country. Some state DOTs get it, but I am seeing some movement in federally elected officials, probably more so in the Senate. We haven't come to terms with our energy dependence, and that's not going to happen in a presidential election year. I remain disappointed in our inability to face those challenges without blinders, but very directly. But I have seen some positive movements, and I've seen some senators, especially whose eyes are open to it now and who are stating--perhaps not publicly--but who are stating this is a new issue that has got to be addressed, and it's got to be addressed in the next congress. We cannot possibly work and grow ourselves out of this financial climate without investing in our infrastructure.

The Mission of Reconnecting America

Our work is, principally and very simply, how we grow and invest in our neighborhoods, our communities, cities and regions, at the connection of transportation choices and affordable communities that promote the good health of our citizens. We're about transforming those neighborhoods or regions into really thriving places that our people choose to live and to work and to play. And transportation's at the very center of that; it looks different in different states and cities and regions, but it's also about riding something you can afford to a place where you can actually afford to live. Think about the connectivity of this country: we are connected states, connected through transportation systems. The public has to think--and, therefore, the federal level and state and local level must think--from the time the citizen leaves their front door until they get to where they're destination is, whether that's to the hospital or to the community college, or to the place where they work or to a city that requires their business, or their choice to travel, and back. That's what Reconstructing America is really about: it's that seamless transportation experience that is both cost-effective to the citizen and also to the government entities that help provide that connectivity.

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