

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Yonah Freemark, Founder & Writer, *The Transport Politic*

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Yonah Freemark:

Citizen Engagement Happens Locally

The infrastructure may not be up to par compared to a lot of other countries, and it may not be up to par compared to what we want it to be in the United States, but the truth is there are a lot of other issues in the country that command a lot more attention of people. I think people are much more engaged in issues like healthcare, whether we should have military incursions in the Middle East, and so as a result infrastructure has been put off the table for civic discussion. That said, I think that in a lot of local areas where there are discussions to be had about transportation, for instance when there's a local sales tax referendum, there's plenty of civic discourse about whether or not invest in transportation or not.

Tech Talk Turns People Off

The fact that transportation has come across as an extremely technical issue rather than an ideological one causes problems in terms of actually promoting it. I think if you are trying to promote an issue but the only arguments you can make in favor or against it are based on technical explanations then most people will turn off. They won't be involved in such a conversation because they won't feel like they are ready to take on the issues that are being discussed. So yes I would agree that the whole rhetoric around transportation causes there to be problems in terms of engaging people on the issues.

Political Discourse on the National Level

Form my viewpoint there are local entrepreneurial public officials who have successfully pushed for major investment in transportation programs in their cities. And we can see examples of that from the Democratic side and someone like Villaraigosa in Los Angeles and even from the Republican side, Pat McCrory in Charlotte. These politicians have made very strong civic discourse in favor of transportation investments. They've convinced their local citizens to vote for investments in transportation and they have succeeded in producing successful transportation programs that have provided for an alternative to congestion. I do not think that there is a sense that there is nothing to be done. I think there is a problem with a lack of good political discourse about how to make those changes. And at the national level, frankly, it doesn't exist. There is no true political discourse that discusses how we can provide an alternative to the

congestion we see today. But I think we are seeing a lot of alternative ways to think about it in a lot of cities.

Stalling Rail Infrastructure

My sense about high-speed rail is that we as a country chose to invest in \$8 billion in high-speed rail in early 2009 under President Obama's Stimulus Act, and we had a chance to invest significantly in inner-city rail; And the result was a massive backlash among conservative groups, and the Republican party in general, that has caused the issue of inner-city rail to become increasingly politicized and impossible to discuss without having incredible partisan rancor. As a result, if we have any hope of moving forward on high-speed rail or inner-city rail in general in the country right now, the fact is you have Democrats in control of the national government. Otherwise there will not be significant investment because Republicans have decided that public investment in inner-city rail is a terrible thing to invest in, and the result has been that inner-city rail seems like it's increasingly far off in the United States in terms of having good quality service.

Losing Confidence in the Feds

My sense is that in 2008 there was the assumption that the next transportation bill would be large and a 6-year commitment and the fact that there has been no such commitment over the past 4 years has given people the sense that the federal government is not to be relied upon and that Congress is incapable of pushing through major investments in transportation. I do think one result has been that people are increasingly looking towards local sources for transportation funding and private sources for transportation funding as an alternative to federal investment. I don't know if that's a problem in the long-term, but it certainly indicates that people have less and less confidence in the ability of the federal government to really move forward on investing significantly in transportation.

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