

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Stewart Schwartz, Executive Director, Coalition For Smarter Growth**

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

### **Coalition For Smarter Growth: Goals and Activities**

We're trying to promote a better way to grow in the Washington, DC region. We believe that a network of transit-oriented communities represents the most sustainable and competitive future for our region. We've participated heavily in the infrastructure debates in the Washington, DC area, both through our regional council's governments and during the recent transportation funding debate in the Virginia and Maryland General Assembly. We, of course, have been pushing for more investment in transit, local street infrastructure with complete-streets design for maximizing pedestrian and bicycle usage. At the same time we have questioned some of the more sprawl-inducing outer suburban highway projects, and we've also put a particular emphasis on something many people have, which is "Fix It First" that's basically addressing the backlog in repairs and replacement of aging bridges, roads and transit systems.

### **Stakeholders MUST Join the Dialogue**

Citizens are critical and non-profit advocacy groups are particularly important. Frequently, the business community advocates for infrastructure investments, but I think you need a broader coalition and I think you need to have the conservation and smart-growth community, affordable-housing advocates, transit advocates and others at the table in advocating for infrastructure. At the same time, I think it is very important that we not just look at throwing money at the problem, but that we do it from a smart-growth perspective, we make the investments from a smart-growth perspective. So where and how we grow is the most important issue to answer up front, and then building the infrastructure to support more efficient patterns of development.

### **Dispelling Doubt About Investment**

I think that there's been a general distrust of government generated from some sectors over the last decade or more that has contributed to not having confidence in government investment. At the same time there are also, I think, some very specific concerns about government investments in infrastructure, particularly if you're sitting in traffic in an American suburb and you see how often new investments are made but your traffic doesn't get any better. So there's some resignation that traffic is a fact of life in your metropolitan areas of the U.S., and that you don't see great improvements after years of mega investments in many areas. So there's some doubt that we can solve the problem, and again, that's why we think that it's so important to not only say that inaction is not a solution, but also to try to tie the action through a more comprehensive approach linking land use and transportation.

### **Three Tenets of Smart Growth**

First, it's a commitment to your existing cities and towns, reinvesting where you already have infrastructure: your existing cities, your towns, your older suburbs. Second, it's creating a framework within a region around high-capacity transit such as metro rail and light rail, commuter rail and some of the other infrastructure, and it can also include bus rapid transit systems. Third, the communities that you build in conjunction with your transit should be mixed-use, mixed-income and very walkable and bike-friendly. In other words, they would have a more traditional network of local streets that allow people many options for getting around, and at the same time, while you're creating a development pattern like that, you are reducing the amount of land you're consuming, you're reducing the outward sprawling movement of our regions, and you're preserving natural areas and farmland in the process.

### **Citizens Demand Livable Cities**

The argument has been that you can have more affordable housing if you buy cheaper land and build houses farther away from the core, that this is part of the American Dream and that there is, that people want to live in a larger house with a larger yard and don't mind living far from work. But I think many of those ideas are changing, and there's a huge shift in demographics and market demand, where first of all it's young people who have moved to our cities, they're moving to communities in our area, like Arlington, Virginia where there's lots of transit. They don't own cars. One good reason not to own a car is so they can pay off their student loans. They're walking and biking and they like the vibrancy of cities and the social interaction. They, at the same time now, are being joined by baby boomers, who are now empty nesters, and who are seeking to downsize. They, too, are coming back to cities, walkable neighborhoods in the suburbs, places with good transit accessibility, coffee shops and other services. So there is a big shift in both demographics and market demand that is now creating a very positive momentum toward a smarter-growth future for our cities and metropolitan regions, not to mention the small towns throughout America.

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