

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Build Local Support and Elected Officials Will Follow

There's a variety of ways from the local to the national level that I think public engagement is important. For example, right now we are working on "how do we expand the transit infrastructure in Cook County?" Cook County is important because, of course, we're the economic center for the state of Illinois, and as Chicago and Cook County go, so goes the economy of the state, so it's important for us to have an infrastructure, particularly in transit, that is sustainable and that serves the population. One of the ways that we are looking to assure that happens is going directly to the people of Cook County, telling them what we're doing, telling them how it's going to benefit them, and that they should express to their elected leaders that this is something they should support, and they want the elected officials to provide the funds in order to expand transit in Cook County. Now we're doing it in Cook County, and we think it can be a model for other counties in the state. For example, right next door to us is DuPage County, which is the second largest county, population-wise, in the state. If we can get this model going in Cook, I think it's a model for DuPage. Locally building up that support for infrastructure funding, I think, is an important way of getting the elected officials to respond and provide the solutions to our infrastructure problems. But we also have, as part of our Transit Future Program, we have this national policy for the region, CREATE, which is a way of providing more efficient rail transportation through our region, because as the center of the transportation world we have railroads coming from the east, from the west, and from the south, all converging here, but nothing going across Chicago. And so CREATE is meant to provide more direct access through Cook County of Chicago to the rest of the country, but also includes grade separation because when the railroads were built they were built at grade. Now we've grown up, and so CREATE is designed to also have projects that will provide that grade separation. That came about from people in the communities experiencing these delays, who pressed upon Congressman Bill Lipinski, who was in Congress at the time on the Transportation & Infrastructure Committee, that this was costing them. I mean local business people who couldn't get deliveries, people who couldn't get to work because of the mile-long trains. Now we have two-mile long trains that go through the region. It was the community expressing to Congressman Lipinski that this was needed, and so he got it into T21 and we're gradually implementing these grade separations here in Chicago.

It's up to the Infra Community to Raise Public Awareness

People will complain about potholes, and they will complain about delays when you have trains blocking your way. But bridges only become something that is visible in the public mind when the bridge in Minnesota falls into the Mississippi. Or here, when we had a train full of coal drop on innocent people under a viaduct because it was so

weakened. I look at infrastructure, particularly transit infrastructure, when I'm going under it because that's one of the things I'm interested in, but bridges in bad conditions only become visible when something catastrophic happens. I think that's part of it. I look at the [American] Society of Civil Engineers grading of our infrastructure. Most people don't know that exists, and the fact that they gave Illinois a D+ on transit. I know that, but a lot of people in the community don't know that and they don't use that as an organizing strategy to say to their elected officials, "We need to have this bridge repaired." or things of that sort. We need to do more about getting people to pay attention to some of these infrastructure problems. We're talking about transportation infrastructure, but it's the same thing with water infrastructure. At CNT, as part of our programs, we're looking at how our water infrastructure is crumbling, that we need to invest more so that we're not losing a precious commodity, a resource like water. We process water, we clean it up, we put it in pipes, we send it to homes, but we're losing a lot of it along the way because our infrastructure is in such bad shape. Of course that's under the ground. People don't even know it's happening. I think those of us who do know have a responsibility for raising it in the public's eye so that they understand their water bill is going up and up and up because we're producing more and more water, pumping more and more water; it's just not getting to their faucet. We have to make that connection for people.

Getting Through to Congress

I think the only way we can move our Congress is the local elected officials. Local populations have to say to them, "We want you to stop fighting, and we want you to solve our problem." It's costing the economy, it's costing individual tax payers in terms of increased costs, or increased barriers or impediments to being productive and living sustainably. Sometimes the bottom up is the only way to move those folks up there at the top. The thing is that I know as a society we like to talk about "those legislators" rather than "my legislators," and I think we need to personalize it. We have to take responsibility for talking to our legislator and not blaming somebody else because something isn't getting done. If we're not saying anything to the folks who are representing us in Congress, then we can't expect anything different than what we're getting. Part of democracy is that you have to be engaged if we're going to have a democracy that's successful. I think part of the challenge is to always try and help people see how they can make a difference, how they can get the elected officials to behave differently so that we really get these problems solved.

The Center for Neighborhood Technology

The Center For Neighborhood Technology has a mission of making urban communities sustainable for low and moderate-income residents. Our target audience is low or moderate-income residents, and what we try and do is reduce the cost of living, give opportunities for things to be more efficient, for people to be able to live locally: that's our goal, that's our mission. We look at what policies exist and what regulations are in place that either are barriers or opportunities for achieving urban sustainability, and then what we try and do with those policies is create market responses, so real-world examples or demonstrations or projects that will amplify and implement new policy changes. And then of course it's important for us to have that social engagement, that

community engagement that we do, by organizing, by communicating. Our websites, for example, are part of that communication: technology transfer, providing information to engage the community and so forth. Public engagement is an important part of achieving the objectives that we have.

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