

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

The FAST Act: A Step Forward, But Not for Rail

It certainly is a good step forward. It's not the kind of step forward that ultimately I think is fully needed, but as opposed to standing still, at least it is moving forward. It does create some stability and moderate increases in some new areas of focus, but I think certainly in other areas it's lacking. On the rail side there's really nothing in the bill that would help advance major new corridors, whether it's the enhancements on the Northeast corridor or whether it's projects in Texas or projects like ours. There is some funding for inter-city rail, but in terms of really getting to the next generation of rail in the country this bill doesn't do it, and hopefully there will be a later bill that will come along and pick up those pieces. We're continuing to move ahead without that, but obviously it would be nice to have federal support for these kinds of programs.

California: Building HSR Regardless Of Federal Support

There is a lot of excitement and what people tend to hear about are the battles and the negativity, but I can tell you virtually—if not literally—everyone that I talk to who has had the chance to go overseas, whether to Asia or to Europe, and has had the chance to ride the system, comes back just an absolute convert. And the question then is just “when the heck are we getting it?” And that's the common reaction. And I think the more progress we make, the more people start to feel that this is real and it's going to happen. I think that kind of excitement will build and the pieces will start to fall into place. California, with the leadership of Governor Brown and the legislature—we've taken the position that we're going to advance this program with or without additional federal support, and we've committed to doing that and are doing that, and we've got major construction underway in the Central Valley on the first segment. We have the environmental approvals for the rest of the system underway. We just approved, actually, our latest major design-build contracts, which continue the pattern of aggressive, competitive bidding from international players who see the opportunities. They see the market and they want to be a part of a program like this.

We're Too Comfortable With What We've Got

Here in California when you look at the growing population, congestion on the highways that we have, the congestion at the airports, and then layer on top of that the very strong commitments that the state has made to reducing greenhouse gasses inciting climate change, and to preserving quality of life—we've got to do something different, and we've got to make an investment like this. And the crazy thing is in years past this is what we did as a country. This is how we built, how we grew. Look back at the state water system, or the golden gate bridge, which is arguably the most iconic structure in the state. That was incredibly controversial in its time, but people got it done. And

imagine now what California would look like without the Golden Gate Bridge, without the water system, without the University of California system. You know, what we as a country would be like had Lincoln not pursued the transcontinental railroad right in the middle of the Civil War! You need to make investments to keep moving forward, and that's what this is; this is just the next generation of it, and we've gotten a little too comfortable with what we've got and have lost that sense of the need to keep investing in order to keep moving forward.

Infrastructure Investment Should Be Non-Partisan

Early in my career I worked on the Hill. I worked in the Senate for Frank Lautenberg, the Senator from New Jersey—the late, great Frank Lautenberg. And when I was working for him then—that was as recently as 20, 25 years ago—infrastructure was a non-partisan issue. Things got done. Ronald Reagan signed the transportation bills; he signed the gas tax. Steve Symms and Frank Lautenberg worked together with Pat Moynihan and John Chafee to pass bills. It's only been in recent times that it's gotten partisan and I really hope we can move away from that and get focused on what these kinds of investments really are, which again are about investing in our economic productivity, investing in jobs, investing in environmental enhancement, investing in quality of life, and move the discussion to terms like that and away from partisan discussions. I think people have kind of lost that sense of what it takes to keep an economy going, to build cities, to build a great country, because we haven't done a whole lot of it in the last generation or so. We've just kind of been maintaining what we have. And one of the things that we see here and that I see all the time, there is a real interest and an excitement among younger people here about this system and what it will mean. And they want it. They take the view that previous generations built the freeway system, or built other things, and this is what they want, and this is what they see as part of their future. And so we are seeing self-starting groups like at university campuses: student groups that use the term “I will ride” as an organizing theme. And they're showing up at public meetings and discussing their support and that's something we certainly encourage and need to see more of and, you know the same out of the business community. We've got very strong support from every regional Chamber of Commerce in the state because they see the importance of investments like this to the future. They need to be vocal as well. And I think people need to put aside the partisan stuff, put aside the arguing and let's get down to doing what we need to do to keep the state moving forward and keep the country moving forward.

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