

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD), Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

The Many Ways That Infrastructure Matters

Infrastructure matters for many reasons. Part of it is public safety: as we've seen too frequently, particularly in the Washington area and the metro safety issues, it can affect safety. Infrastructure matters in regards to our way of life. The commute time now into our urban centers is getting more and more challenging every day. It matters to our environment when we see the impact of greenhouse gas emissions and what we need to do to have a more efficient transportation system. It matters if we're going to be able to have a modern economy and create the jobs we want for our children and our grandchildren. You need to have the roads, the bridges, the dams, the electrical systems, the water infrastructure systems in order to accomplish those types of results. So it's important for the quality of life as well as the economic future of America, and we have fallen behind. A lot of times the issues are out of sight and sometimes out of mind, but it catches up with you. And we recognize that it's in our national interest to invest a lot more in modernizing our infrastructure.

We Need to Re-Think Infra Funding

The need to move forward on infrastructure investments and transportation—or in water infrastructure and electrical infrastructure, the whole gamut—enjoys bipartisan support. Democrats and republicans know that this is good for our economy and it's what the public expects from their government, to be able to provide the wherewithal to modernize our transportation and infrastructure. They understand that. And the good news of course we have passed a major multi-year transportation reauthorization, we're on the verge of passing a water resources reauthorization. Also we are on the verge of passing some important legislation, already have passed some. But here's the challenge moving forward: the funding sources for these infrastructure investments are not going to be there in the future. For transportation it's a per-gallon gasoline tax which just doesn't raise the revenue it used to. So we need to look at ways in which we're going to be having sustainable programs moving into the future so we have predictability for infrastructure and development in America.

Long-Term Federal Funding Is Key

There is no question that you need to have predictable long-term funding for major transportation programs. If you're going to replace a bridge or build a bridge, you need to have the funding that's going to last multiple years because those projects can't be built on a one-year budget. If you're going to do a major interchange or do a major road program it requires multi-year commitments. And yes the local governments are

prepared to do their share, and they have stepped up and they're prepared to do what they can, but they can't do it without the federal partner. And they need to know that there's multi-year authorization for the funding as they go forward. So when we're talking about an expansion of the transit system, or we're talking about the replacement of a bridge, or we're talking about a major highway program, you need to have the predictability of multi-year funding.

Taking Action Before It's Too Late

We could show you the direct result of building a road, or a direct result of building a bridge, or improving our water infrastructure. It creates jobs, but the long-term impact as far as economic growth is indisputable. It's a multiplier effect that every dollar we invest will return many more dollars to our economy. So there's clearly the direct economic impact, but look at it this way: Americans believe when they turn the tap on that they'll get safe drinking water. In fact that was not true in Flint Michigan, and the price for that was astronomical. The seeds for that type of problem exist in every one of our urban communities in America. We have aged water systems. So we cannot afford to ignore these needs. Too often it's out of sight out of mind; they don't recognize that a bridge is falling down or a transit system is unsafe, or that there's a solution to the gridlock in their morning commute. They don't really realize that life can be different. Then it's interesting: we'll see people who will travel to another country and see a more modern transit system and say, "well gee, why don't we have this here in America?" Or will see a tragedy occur such as we've seen in Washington on our transit systems, and then people say, "why haven't we taken action?" Or they'll see literally a bridge collapse, as we've seen in America, and they say, "why haven't we invested money?" Then the calls come in and they demand action and our legislatures act. But we should be proactive on this and Americans should be more engaged. And quite frankly I think it is a popular political issue; we just need to focus on the results and recognize there is a way that we can provide for the long-term stability of our infrastructure modernization.

Why America Is Strong, and How We Can Keep It That Way

The only way you can serve, I think, in Congress is to be an optimist, because there are days here that you could get discouraged. But we recognize that we have the strongest country in the world. We have the strongest country for many reasons. It's the innovation of Americans; it's our commitment towards each other; it's for good governance; it's the strength of America's presence globally, but we know that we need to first take care of our concerns at home and that means let's make sure that Americans have every opportunity that this great country offers, and that means the public officials need to take the steps to modernize our infrastructure, to modernize our capacity in America so that we can continue to grow.

www.InfrastructureUSA.org

212.414.9220

info@infrastructureusa.org

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