

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Green Infrastructure Creates More Sustainable Communities

Green infrastructure is an idea whose time has come. Parks are centrally located and strategically located in urban communities. To use existing owned public land is much more cost effective than almost any other solution when it comes to the installation of green infrastructure, stormwater management projects. And the larger-scale benefit is that these lands are already in protected status for a conservation purpose. The challenge that you're looking at broadly across America is that you have hundreds of cities that are under consent decrees that have to upgrade their stormwater management systems and reduce combined sewer overflows with stormwater, improve the quality of water in their communities. These are harsh requirements that are costing cities to pony up funding that many of them don't have for this purpose. So they're immediately challenged by this. I think in a bigger scale, too, the notion of using green infrastructure is a more cost-effective approach than grey infrastructure. Many, many examples show how using a green approach is cheaper than using a traditional grey approach. But I think the bigger benefit to using green infrastructure stormwater management is that it has so many community benefits that, beyond the functionality of treating and filtering stormwater, build more sustainable communities.

Nationwide Need for Green Infra

I think that the greatest problems and the greatest challenges are in addressing aging infrastructure and the cleaning of urban stormwater. We haven't put a percentage on this, but when we received our grant we intended to fund 3 to 5 demonstration projects across the country, and we thought we would get a couple dozen good proposals. We had over 1,000 expressions of interest and we've received 213 fully completed proposals. It shows there's a tremendous need, and most of these came out of urban park and recreation agencies working in concert with their city, municipal, or county government and a non-profit partner. So it totally exceeded our expectations and shows there's a tremendous need. Now we had an added component to ours: it wasn't just green infrastructure in parks, but it was green infrastructure in parks with the intention of improving social equity and improving underserved communities in terms of environmental and social benefits.

Stormwater Management Is Increasingly Urgent

You have the increasing cost of treating this stormwater by city and municipal governments that is starting to go out of sight. Aging infrastructure has to be replaced; the funding at the federal, state and local level is not there. Creative, innovative approaches have to be taken. You look at some of the big events—extreme weather

events—that have hit communities, urban communities in the U.S: Superstorm Sandy, Hurricane Katrina, the blue-sky flooding that's now occurring in Miami Beach and Norfolk and other coastal cities along the Atlantic seaboard. These are challenges that have to be met and they're combined with sea-level rise, they're combined with the challenge of making communities more resilient to extreme weather and sea-level rise, so stormwater is one of the greatest challenges facing urban communities in terms of infrastructure.

Empowerment Through Park Building

The idea of green infrastructure in parks is beautifully suited to the whole notion of community engagement and empowerment. And in fact it's probably one of the biggest benefits that we see about the idea of putting green infrastructure in parks. Citizens often feel they don't have a voice in how their government works and the projects that they commit to and how money is spent, but in the notion of putting green infrastructure stormwater management in parks, it opens up a whole new realm of how and what citizens can do to influence the outcomes of how stormwater is managed. For example, we have been very focused on the notion of youth and young-adult employment in the whole idea of workforce development, green infrastructure workforce development associated with these projects. Parks have a long history of employing young kids and young adults in conservation-related work. And we train them; we have a great record of developing soft skills self confidence, safety awareness, employable skills, and the best part about it in these green infrastructure projects is the young adults and youth that come out of the communities. They get a paycheck for what they're doing, they're proud of the work that they do, and people see the value of how important it is for the community to be engaged in these projects. In addition they provide public access and outdoor recreation for people who are in the greatest need of it. So there's a health benefit. Not just the kind of indirect benefit from reducing urban heat-island effect, or providing cleaner air and water from urban forest canopy, or other environmental benefits, but the idea of access to these places where there's a safe place to walk and to do family activities, to ride a bike, to have daily healthful outdoor activities.

The NRPA: Mission and Work

The National Recreation and Park Association is a national non profit representing the interest of public parks and recreation across America. You have about 52,000 members, professional and citizen members, that broadly serve communities across America. One of the emerging interests that we have at NRPA is an effort to look at the role parks play in making communities more sustainable, resilient, and livable. Therefore we've had an increasing interest in the role of green infrastructure and how it can play in the notion of dealing with floodwater, extreme weather events, and a whole range of improving the quality of life and communities. So we began a partnership project with the American Planning Association called the Great Urban Parks Campaign. It's a broad-based effort, and we're going to be dealing with a lot of cutting-edge sustainability and community development issues. One that we focused on initially is the idea of green stormwater management in parks to benefit underserved communities. We were recipients of a generous grant from the JPB foundation to support this project, and we just made our announcement for four grantees which are non-profit

organizations in Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Atlanta, and Denver working with the local park and recreation departments to do green storm water management improvement projects in parks that will have a direct social equity and community benefit.

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