

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

2017 Report Card: the Good, the Bad and the Transit

We've been doing this since 1998, and in 2009, the grade overall was a "D," so in 2013 it nudged up to a "D+." I had high hopes, but unfortunately we're still holding strong at a "D+" because some sectors did go up—we do invest and there are bright spots in all 16 sectors. Unfortunately other sectors went down, so the average is still "D+." First I'll tell you about the poster child for what we should be doing—so that's rail. So in rail, last time in 2013, the grade was a "C+" and rail jumped up over "B-" and now it's a "B." That's because freight rail, which is privately owned—a lot of private investment, so billions of dollars each year put into rail, and the grades show it. They've also used some TIGER grants to do some innovative things, and so they're moving ahead. That's when you do things right. A "B" is the best grade on this report card. Then you look at our worst performer, which is transit. Transit is sitting at a "D-." It went down since 2013, and one of the issues is we're just not maintaining—so we're deferring maintenance—on our transit lines. Well, you see it in New York. I'm seeing it right now in DC because I come here quite a bit and I've had to jump off that one station, go to a shuttle and go to another station and ultimately get to my destination because they were doing some maintenance, serious maintenance that's slowing down the user. So we're waiting until things get to the point where they're almost broken, and deferred maintenance means that it costs more to get it back into good condition than if you just put a little bit of money in every year and maintained it properly. Just like a car, you keep water in the radiator, you make sure you've got oil, you keep good tires on it, you take care of your paint job by washing and waxing it every so often, your car's going to look good. You don't do that and all of a sudden you might need a new transmission. That's when you defer maintenance. And that's what we're doing with our transit systems.

We're Not Living up to Our Responsibilities

What it says to me is that we Americans, for the past generation, have really taken a vacation from investing in infrastructure. So we're relying on infrastructure that's been put in place, for the most part, by our grandparents and our parents. We really haven't been stewarding the things that they have put in place for us, and we're using them and enjoying them. Because we haven't maintained them very well, we've allowed the condition overall, across all 16 sectors, to get to a point where many of them are out of date—and, I mean, a "D" is just right above an "F," and "F" is failing. So we really can't allow this to continue any longer, or it's going to impact us. I think one of the problems is we have gotten into the habit of just waiting until things break, and when you have many sectors at a "D," it just takes one major event to shut something down and have something fail. And then we throw a lot of money at it. But that's not a wise way of handling things, because when you're dealing with a disaster, you're throwing four times the money at what is now broken, instead of maintaining something in a condition that's at least average condition. I'd love to get to a "B" condition, where we have conditions "good." An "A" condition is when it's brand, spanking new and it's got all the bells and whistles, so it's either brand new or been rehabilitated.

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Water Pipes and Water Funding - Both Broken Systems

One of the issues with drinking water—and we all need it, you can't not have water. We all use it, just like surface transportation, but a lot of the distribution systems for water are underground, out of sight, out of mind, until we have a water main break. We've got old, leaky systems that are leaking out drinking water, so we're cleaning it but we're not getting all that clean water to you and I, the customers. Some of it leaks out before it gets to us because our old piping systems, they're just old and leaking. Another issue with drinking water is if you look at communities across the country, there's a very big variation between what is charged for drinking water. So in some areas we're subsidizing clean water—and by subsidizing clean water, you're not even covering the cost of cleaning it, much less properly maintaining the plant and the distribution system. When you subsidize things like that on the long term, it's just not a sustainable way of handling it. It's hard to put any money in when you're not even charging enough to cover the cost of cleaning the water day in and day out.

It's up to Citizens to Demand Better Infra

A lot of our elected officials, including our President, ran on a platform that said we were going to make infrastructure a priority. Well, now's the time for action. So at the federal level, at the state level, even at the county level, now's the time that people can hold those elected officials, hold their feet to the fire and say, "Hey, come on, let's do something about this instead of just talking about it." Voters just have to let their elected officials know that this is important to them, because when voters talk to elected officials, they listen. So if enough people who vote tell them, "Hey, we've got to make this a priority," it's going to happen. And another thing is, we're just going to have to pay for it; there's no money tree out there, no magic infrastructure fairy that's going to wave a magic wand and grow money for infrastructure. We have to pay for it.

Advocacy is a Vital Aspect of the Engineering Profession

This is a strong call to all engineers, not just civil engineers. The civil engineers are the ones that understand this infrastructure, because we're the ones that plan, design, construct and operate and maintain it. So we know the condition and we have to stop sitting in our offices and being worried and start advocating. I'm an engineering educator. I'm a professor; I teach at the University of New Orleans. I teach structural engineering and sometimes transportation engineering, and I have to be better at letting our students know that that's part of what civil engineering is all about. It's not just learning your profession but it's also advocating for it. I think we have to see ourselves in a little bit different way. ASCE does a good job of this; they actually educate the engineers on what bills are moving right now that impact infrastructure, and then set up appointments with their elected officials. And so they'll sit down with their elected officials, face to face, and talk about specific bills and specific solutions, like raising the gas tax. And we also have some folks at each section; most states consist of a separate section. California is so big that it has a few sections, and so they'll actually do state report cards—and instead of flying into DC, they'll fly into the state capital and sit down face to face with their state legislators. We have to get active on the county level too: county officials, city officials and talking to chambers. So we just have to let people know, because a lot of times it's taken for granted, people don't even think about it until it's broken.

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