

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Bridging the Political Gap to Build Infrastructure

I think that at the local level there's unanimity that we need significant investment in infrastructure in order to propel our economy forward. And the experience of Harvey in Houston really just pounds home the importance of integrating the future climate change impacts into the way we plan and invest in our communities. Those efforts in some ways have really been blocked by the Trump administration—in other ways, just languished, because there seems to be no action on infrastructure. We just did a poll over the summer that showed overwhelming support for public investment in infrastructure and addressing mobility options like transit, addressing the strength of our bridges and making sure that everybody has clean water. And every one of those priorities received overwhelming bipartisan support. What I think is in the way is that our elected officials aren't listening to people at the local level, and that's one reason why I have chosen to work with mayors across the country who have an ability to take charge of the pathway that their communities are taking and show that there are solutions that are popular, that create jobs, that grow the economy, and make our communities more inclusive and resilient. Hopefully we have enough drumbeat at the local level that we'll start to see changes over the next 2, 4, 6, 8 years. But there is a giant chasm between Washington and people in communities about what the priorities are.

Creating the Clean, Green, Livable Cities of the Future

We believe that cities, and the places we all live, are very innovative opportunities to address environmental problems, to future-proof against climate change, and to address some of the historic inequities that have led to some people being burdened more than others by pollution or other environmental problems. So we work with communities all over the U.S. and internationally to help identify the policies and programs and financing strategies that would actually make our cities part of the environmental solution. There's a lot of evidence that the clean energy economy is a huge job opportunity and business development opportunity for the U.S. There've been legions of reports written on how many people are already working in the clean energy economy, and aren't really being counted as a growth sector. Same thing in urban stormwater. What we're learning in places like Prince George's County in Maryland is that we're able to create more jobs and grow businesses with a set of natural infrastructure interventions that improve the environment, reduce urban flooding and protect people from climate change.

The Right Infra for a Changing Climate

There really is no conflict between saying you would like to have more infrastructure investment and saying that you're an environmentalist. They're one and the same. The challenge is that the plans and projects that are on the books in many states run counter to what we need in our communities to protect people. And that's where we need to take a hard look at what kind of infrastructure we're investing in, because the same-old, same-old as we just saw through these two big storms isn't going to get us there. If you look at Florida's efforts to strengthen building codes after previous hurricanes, they really were courageous in doing that, fighting business interests that thought that it would be more expensive to build stronger buildings. Ultimately, it's a cost-saving measure because the newer buildings in Florida weathered the storm far better than buildings built before the new codes. If you look at it in a life-cycle viewpoint, the rigorous codes that Florida adopted did help significant people. In 2015, under the Obama administration, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had adopted a set of new requirements that would require states who want access to hazard mitigation funds—or funds to help them future-proof infrastructure— they had to not only look back at past trends, but they had to look forward to the potential of climate change in their specific communities. The Trump administration eliminated those requirements, and this is a major problem because in 2018, 32 states are coming due to submit new hazard mitigation plans; in 2019 another 14 will. I'm sure that if we lose this momentum and we aren't really looking at the future impacts, the multiple 100-year floods that are coming, so many people are going to be put in harm's way. It is unconscionable.

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