

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

White House Hopes to Dismantle Amtrak

The White House wants to cancel all of what we call the “national network” trains, which are the long-distance routes, and instead, focus on the Northeast Corridor, between Boston and Washington, DC, and what are called “state-supported routes,” which are shorter routes that serve smaller areas of the country and, generally, are within a state or two. This would appear to be the perfect time to be making investments in passenger rail, as we face a mobility crisis in this country, and we face an infrastructure crisis in this country. We have crumbling bridges, we have pockmarked roads, we have congestion everywhere. We have tunnels that are a problem. We have waterways that are a problem. Everywhere you look in this country, infrastructure is really threatened. You would think that the emphasis would be to invest in passenger rail as a way to ease congestion, as a way to increase economic development in the towns that rail serves, as a way to improve the economic opportunities for residents in rural America. And yet, the White House proposal would eliminate that. Fortunately, Congress seems to have largely recognized the benefits that passenger rail brings to their communities. Some very encouraging news came out of members who worked on the appropriations committees responsible for rail funding. Still, the battle's not over yet and it's pretty clear that there are still elements in politics that think that passenger rail really shouldn't even exist, despite the fact that 86% of the Congress, in 2015, voted for and passed a five-year surface transportation bill that included strong funding for Amtrak across the country.

Assaults Against Passenger Rail

We are mostly talking about support for Amtrak, although there are also programs that were threatened in the White House budget that support commuter rail, local transit systems. The TIGER Grant program is a good example of a program that continues to face the threat, and that's been vital for helping communities work on their transit systems and their commuter rail. So yes, it's largely about Amtrak, but not exclusively about Amtrak. The assault has been broad-based against passenger rail, generally. When we talk about the long distance network, that is Amtrak's network of trains that cross the country East-West, and, to some extent, North-South. All of those long distance trains, trains that run between places like Chicago and Seattle, serve dozens of communities along the way. Trains that run from Chicago to Los Angeles serve dozens of communities along the way. Trains that run between New York and New Orleans serve dozens of communities along the way. All those communities, 225 of them in all, would face the loss of service if the proposal were to go through.

Washington's Infra Policies

Unfortunately, this is a time in Washington when a lot of campaign priorities seem to have fallen by the wayside. Whether you're talking about infrastructure or healthcare or any one of a number of issues, what seems to have happened is that what's said on the campaign trail has

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borne very little resemblance to what we've seen in official Washington. I think what we're seeing is a tug-of-war over using these kinds of programs as symbols for other kinds of fights. It's not a black-and-white issue; it's not the White House versus Congress. There are elements within the White House that want to see certain things happen, and others within the White House don't want to see it happen. Likewise, Congress has 535 opinions on what the right course should be. What you're seeing is the lack of a unifying principle to advance any of the projects that we talked about during the election season. That's really where this has started to come undone. The good news is that over the years, members of Congress—even those who at one time were opposed to Amtrak—have come around to the idea that Amtrak really is a vital public service, a public convenience, and a necessity, particularly in rural America. They understand this. Regardless of whether you are a progressive Democrat or the most conservative Tea Party Republican, we have seen folks on both sides strongly support Amtrak in their communities. Because they understand that it's not about ideology, that it's about economic development and it's about making sure that the towns in their constituencies survive and thrive. What you're seeing is that narrative playing out as the White House offers a proposal, and so far Congress is beating it back.

Citizen Engagement to Keep Rail Running

I think citizen engagement is vital. That's our bread and butter here in the association, to engage citizens and their communities to stand up for their train service. In fact, this past summer, we launched a campaign that resulted in close to 40 rallies around the country that were staged in small towns and larger cities alike, where thousands and thousands of people registered their displeasure with the thought of losing their service. The best metrics we have suggest that our campaign reached 17 million Americans this summer, and people responded. There was a petition with 210,000 signatures on it to fight back against the proposed Amtrak cuts. The most important thing that we can advocate for is more citizen engagement, more citizen involvement, and that's true probably even beyond our own issues, that the best thing that citizens can do is to take part in democracy. Call your congressman, call your senator, write them, send them emails, show up at their town hall meetings. Show up when they come home to the district for their vacations, be visible, be seen, be heard, and be part of the process. We think that's vital. We think that is absolutely the most important thing that we can get Americans to do, to take part and have their voices heard.

NARP: Advocating for a Connected America

We are turning 50 years old this year. We are the nation's oldest and largest advocacy organization for passenger rail. Our organization is largely membership driven. Individual members join and pay their dues to support our work. There are 28,000 of them around the country. The majority of our money comes from those members who support our work and people who contribute donations and dollars to help us continue to launch campaigns like the one we did this summer. We're not an industry group; we're not a trade group. We are a membership organization, and members can be as simple as just people who want to continue to ride trains. Individuals, passengers, families, moms, dads and students; they come from all walks of life. We even have over 20 members in Hawaii. Think about that for a moment. There's no Amtrak service in Hawaii, but we have enough people in Hawaii who believe in what we're doing that they've signed up to become members and to support our work. That's who we are. We are a membership organization. We've been around a very long time and we are a nonprofit. Our mission really is to work for a connected America which advocates for the appropriate infrastructure investment to support passenger rail as well as other modes. We very

much support bike share, intercity travel and transit, and bus rapid transit, and really anything that will help us to become a more mobile society.

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