

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Stephen K. Benjamin, Mayor of Columbia, SC and Incoming President of the U.S. Conference of Mayors

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Smart Cities: Technology, Equity and the Future of Work

The amazing thing about smart cities is that you can talk to a mayor from any city anywhere in the world, and the answer you will get will be a little bit different. That's actually a pretty cool thing. At its core, we're all talking about how we use data much more effectively to make better policy decisions. Now, obviously, sometimes that's data that you already have at your disposal, and you can use it to make decisions in the next budget year. But more often than not, it's data that you have at your immediate disposal, to actually be able to shift very quickly, maybe even provide you with some analytics that allow you to make predictive decisions, help you to deal with issues to water and sewer system before they arise, help you actually prevent crimes before crimes happen. The larger discussion around being a smart city has gone even way beyond data analytics, as we watch just a rapid exponential growth in technology. What does it mean for the future of cities, the future of work, the future opportunities to building equitable inclusive cities? We're talking about the future of work: machine learning and artificial intelligence, and how is it going to change the way in which we live. Obviously, the larger and expensive discussions around how do we build out the infrastructure to facilitate that transition to being a smarter city.

Diminishing Federal Contributions to Infrastructure

First of all, I'm a mayor. I'm a mayor of a capital city, of a great American city. So, by definition, I'm an optimist. So I'll start there. I had the pleasure of being at the White House with the president and half a dozen other mayors, and half a dozen governors and other local officials, meeting with our federal officials as we kicked off Infrastructure Week. The reality is this, that—at least for the last 100 years—the delivery of infrastructure around this country has been primarily led by state and local governments. 75% of all infrastructure in this country is built by cities and states, primarily using tax exempt municipal bonds. Private activity bonds, of course, are important in the mix as well. But we have seen, year after year, the federal commitment to infrastructure continue to wane and recede. It's been disappointing. In 2014 alone, we saw our state and local governments invest about \$106 billion in water and sewer infrastructure. The corresponding federal investment was about \$2.5 billion, just as an example of the challenge that we're facing.

Can Cities, States and the Federal Government Finally Work Together?

I'm happy, as the optimistic mayor, that we're talking about infrastructure. It has, historically, been the one issue that brings people on both sides of the aisle together to talk about productive solutions. I wish it was a much more meaty discussion that focused more resources on actually helping us solve 21st-century problems, helps us lever possibilities between public investment, private sector investment, philanthropic investment, but really targeted the way that helps put more hard-working Americans back to work, doing meaningful work and earning a great living. We can do it, in a way, and we've been endeavoring in a way, here in Columbia, to do it in a way that really works—not just to build roads and bridges, but also works to build people and build ladders of opportunity. We're making a significant investment in our infrastructure. We're just over halfway through an \$800 million infrastructure investment in our water and sewer system. We've taken advantage of the low cost of capital and made those investments. We're about to issue our very first green bonds, recognizing that the role that sustainability and protecting our environment plays. We're going to do it around our water-sewer system. We're also, I expect, if we find the success that I anticipate, we're going to also roll out our very first storm water improvement bonds. It would be wonderful to have a partner in Washington D.C. That's been a challenge that we've faced every year since the Nixon administration. Some innovative ideas have come out of the Obama administration and the Bush administration, the Clinton administration as well, and look forward to doing a deeper dive into some of the ideas that President Trump has put forward as well. Again, we're optimistic. We're going to keep doing what we need to do to build what we aspire to build here in Columbia. We're trying to build the most talented, educated, entrepreneurial city in America. We're not atypical. Lots of cities are doing incredibly creative things. We're going to do it, whether we have the support that we should have from Washington, or from our state government, or not.

How Mayors Fit Into the Conversation

You get a half dozen of us around a table, and regardless of geography or party, you won't be able to tell who's from where because the issues tend to be the same. The reality is that, across this country, 85% of our citizens now live in cities and metropolitan economies. 89% of the jobs are in the cities and in metropolitan economies. 91% of America's nearly \$28 trillion GDP is created in cities and metropolitan economies. We are driving the economic growth of this country. And our message is that by partnering with mayors, by looking at the creative solutions that are being deployed all across this country, seeing the innovative ideas, seeing the massive investment in infrastructure, but also embracing the idea of inclusion and ways in which we can all move forward together, is the way to go. Obviously, I know that there will be some major issues of policy that we will never agree with the White House on. On those issues, we'll resort to good old-fashioned American democracy. We'll duke it out and, prayerfully, we'll win at the end of the day. But on the very few issues that we're going to, hopefully, agree on, we'll work together with folks. We're always coming around the table. That's the

strength, I believe, of being a mayor and having to always listen to every opinion, not gerrymandered ideas with narrow constituencies. We're going to continue to do that.

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