

# InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Congressman Tom Reed (R-NY 23rd District)**

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

## **The Problem Solvers Caucus: Proactively Combating Gridlock**

In the beginning of last year, January 2017, we officially started the Problem Solvers Caucus. About 2016, a group of us as members who were meeting on a regular basis, just getting to know each other across the aisle, we went to what we call "Problem Solvers Caucus 2.0," because what we found is that to have relevance in Washington, sometimes voting as a block is very important. Working as a group is very important. What we did in January 2018 is we looked at each other and said, "Look, if we're serious about this, who's not just going to talk the talk, but walk the walk?" We got to 48 members as of today, evenly divided 24 Democrats, 24 Republicans. I co-chair it on the Republican side with my democratic colleague, Josh Gottheimer from New Jersey. What we did is we adopted bylaws. We agreed that if we got to a 75% consensus position with 51% democratic support, 51% Republican support, we as a block of members would join arms and vote together. What it's essentially doing is organizing us to get to "yes," and the infrastructure issue is an area where we got to that 75% consensus. We issued a document, a platform, a framework that got bipartisan support – Problem Solvers Caucus Consensus Position. What we've been doing is things like healthcare, and we got to another position on immigration and border security and the budget cap situation. What we're now, I think, being part of is the change of the culture of Washington, DC. We agree with the American people: that needs to be done to stop this gridlock, stop this government by extremism on the right and the left, and get to the business of the American people.

## **Organizing to Get to "Yes"**

If you can at least organize and come to that common ground, and actually put your name on it like we did with the Problem Solvers Caucus Consensus Position, it carries much more weight. And having worked with our leadership over the last year, we kind of took a page out of the Freedom Caucus. The Freedom Caucus is a group of folks on our hard right, in my opinion, that have gained a tremendous amount of influence because the 40 of them have organized as a voting block. They organize to get to "no;" we organize to get to "yes," and because we're providing alternative paths to our leadership, I can tell you firsthand, we are changing the leverage points of how legislation gets to the finish line. What you see in the Problem Solvers Caucus Infrastructure Proposal is exactly that. Much of this is common sense; much of this are things that the American people, I think, will look at and go, "That's exactly what we're looking for; that's exactly the kind of reforms; that's the kind of expansion of traditional infrastructure and the non-traditional infrastructure improvements like broadband that need to be done." By putting it in black and white, we're holding ourselves accountable and then looking to our leadership to say, "Here we are, we'll stand with you to solve these problems."

## **Answering the Question: How Do We Pay for It?**

I was one of the first in the Republican side of eight in Congress to endorse the President, spent many days in the Oval Office and in the Roosevelt Room with the President and his team. I know he's committed to infrastructure. I know the Administration's committed to infrastructure, and by putting out a proposal, at least he's willing to put it out there for public consumption and

March 2018

debate. At the end of the day, we in Congress are going to have to fill in these buckets, if you would. We in the Problem Solvers Caucus are looking at a trillion dollar number, the President's looking at 1.5 trillion. I think we are going to be able to hit that target of the trillion dollars, not sure about 1.5 trillion but whatever we can do to reach the highest number possible. As a former mayor, I know that number is a realistic and reasonable amount that needs to occur to fix this problem. The real heart of the division that has blocked infrastructure from going forward, is literally that trillion dollar question of how are you going to pay for it. We can do some reforms, we can identify projects, we can identify ways to identify where the projects are going to go and how they're going to be completed in a more efficient manner. It's the "pay for it" that has caused the issue. A lot of folks, their number one response, knee-jerk, simple answer is, "Well, we'll just raise the gas tax." I don't support increasing the gas tax because even if you do, it's not going to be sufficient to get that user fee to the level to address that one trillion dollar minimum mark we need. I think there's new creative ways: you're looking at electric vehicles coming on line. We referenced that in the package as a source of revenue that could be tapped into. You're looking at stretching public dollars with private equity type models, leveraging private equity type models to stretch the dollars as far as possible when it comes to what's available to do it. Also, a recognition that it's going to take all players: local, state, federal and private dollars to get to that trillion dollar mark going forward—and some new creative sources of revenue that maybe we hadn't even thought about before. With a new transportation model coming down the pipeline, for example, I put on your horizon for consideration things like Spectrum Space to control our driverless cars, to control and allow for the future transportation models that are very nearly around the corner in the future.

### **How Disruption Can Help Get the Job Done**

The problem has not gotten better with age; it's only gotten worse. When I was mayor before I went to Congress, I can tell you firsthand, I saw wooden pipes come out of the ground in our city water supply system. That was 10 years ago. Just imagine that being applied a thousand times across the country. As to the state of infrastructure, even 10 years later, that continues to fail and grow worse. You just have to look at Flint, Michigan, for example. You have to look at some areas around New York State, for example, where we are starting to see this aging infrastructure get to the critical point of failure. That is, in and of itself, a motivation that I think is different than what we had before. The other thing that I would put on people's horizons: love him or hate him, I will tell you this President is a disruptor. This President is not somebody, when I've had conversations with him, is stuck with the traditional bureaucratic response that "Well, Mr. Congressman, we can't do it that way because we've never done it that way. This is what we do, this is how we do it and because of the bureaucracy, we're aren't going to change our ways." There is an attitude of disruption that is sweeping over Washington, DC, and the Problem Solvers Caucus, I think, is the leading edge of the disruption when it says, "Enough is enough." Democrats versus Republican doesn't do anybody good other than the elected officials and the political industry. It's about getting the American people taken care of, and that's what we came here to Washington to do. With that, we are looking around the world. Many of us are getting educated on things like how they do things in Australia, with utilizing infrastructure revenues in a way to allow those public private partnerships to be stretched. Look at Hong Kong and what they've done with tapping into the development rights in their public transportation arenas that have allowed them to leverage an asset that was never deployed before. We have a tremendous amount of those assets across America's infrastructure, and that creativity is sweeping Washington. That's why those three points alone, I think, should give us optimism that the time is right, the time is now and we know as Democrats and Republicans, it's got to get done, so let's get it done.

### **Citizens Can Finally Engage in the Process**

The new way infrastructure dollars will be invested is through an open and transparent process. Look at the miscellaneous tariff bill reforms that we have put together on the Ways and Means Committee that deal with tariff reductions and how they are handled. No longer through backdoor, bureaucratic deal making, but an open and transparent process, where you have each branch of government weighing in, the legislative and executive branches, and then also having a public component through the internet and participation with public input to make sure that the projects and the investments that are occurring have all eyes on them, so that the ones that are truly needed in our local communities, in the local area, get the input of the voice of the people to carry that to the top as opposed to what has traditionally been a big problem with infrastructure, in my opinion, is the whole concept of antiquated earmarks, where it was done because of who you know and for political purposes solely. What we want to do is have an open and transparent process where the American people and the next generation can be part of the process. We get into telemedicine, roads that are failing that may be on anyone's horizon because we're in a rural community way outside our state capitals. Have the power of that public input shape where these dollars need to go, because the people know best what is needed for their communities and for their local areas. Engage, engage, engage is the summary of my point to each and every one of them.

**[www.InfrastructureUSA.org](http://www.InfrastructureUSA.org)**

**212.414.9220**

**[info@infrastructureusa.org](mailto:info@infrastructureusa.org)**