

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

We have the capacity, but we lack the will

We do not lack any capacity to do what's needed to be done. We have thousands of engineering firms and contracting firms who are ready to take on an increased workload, and what we're waiting for is for government agencies and private parties to pull the trigger to unleash that capacity. The constraints on moving forward can be summarized in two words: political will. There's insufficient political will to undertake such a program, both in the administration and in the Congress. Barring that, other activities take precedence, and when infrastructure bills come up the amount of money we spend in them will be limited by the other competing interests in our society, which are also important.

Society, as a whole, needs to commit to infrastructure

I don't think we've gotten it yet as far as a societal commitment, because after all these years, we are not committed any more than we were decades ago. In fact there's a case to be made that we actually spent more money decades ago on infrastructure than we're spending today. We hear a lot of talk and as much as there's lots of advocacy by organizations which do believe we need to do more—such as ours here—the fact is that it adds up to little more being done than we used to do. There's quite a frustration. Many of us share that frustration. I believe that the public has not felt the pressure of doing more than is being done now. By pressure, I mean our infrastructure, in a general sense, is not failing in any kind of a crisis mode. At least it's not perceived in the public as being any kind of a crisis, and I think until crises happen in our society, the will to invest any more than a nominal amount is just going to be the order of the day. We're not going to be doing much more any time soon, I don't believe.

Lots of talk + no action from the political sphere

In an overall general way, we keep up with bare, bottom needs and we aren't at a crisis point. However, if we did more, we could reap the benefits of doing more. Our economy could do better, we could do better in our competitiveness and we could just be a much more modernized society for the benefit of all of our citizens. I am disappointed that after all the talk about infrastructure in the last presidential campaign, there's really nothing much going on now. President Trump came up with a way of bypassing normal government expenditures for infrastructure by saying that those expenditures should actually act as seed money for private investment. That is actually a very good idea, but it doesn't offset the need to have public expenditures not tied to seed capital for projects for which there will be very low investor interest in such funding. When you add it all up, there's really nothing more going on today than there was some years ago.

Concerted advocacy efforts needed

I think we have to keep at it every day. I think we have to view every day as Infrastructure Day. I think we need to have more of a full-court press on infrastructure all the time with our elected candidates, and I think infrastructure should be on the ballot for those candidates so that we measure them against not just what they're saying but what they're accomplishing on infrastructure as well. A concerted effort would do us some good. If there is a general lack of societal will to do more than we're doing now, then those who are working for a society in this infrastructure area, will meet the modicum of demand that exists for their services, rather than being the able to respond to a higher demand. It is, in the final analysis, the public that's going to have to decide what level of demand they will call for as far as infrastructure development in this country.

Infrastructure to follow innovation

Our industry has done well for many, many years and I'm optimistic that it will continue to do well. I'm optimistic that our country will continue to modernize and advance. If the measure is continued forward progress, I think we are going to have continued forward progress. If the measure is dramatic increases in forward progress in infrastructure in the short term, I don't see those dramatic increases happening across the board. There are some areas where it clearly is happening. We see private firms such as SpaceX sending satellites into space. We see private companies engaged in the development of autonomous vehicles of all different kinds. I think there will be innovation and there will be infrastructure to meet that innovation when society becomes accustomed to it, and demands the infrastructure to support it. I am generally optimistic. I'm just not in a whirl of optimism about what's going to happen, in the short term, as far as certain basic infrastructure in this country.

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