

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Kristina Swallow, President, American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE)**

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

### **ASCE's Infrastructure Report Card: Tool to Raise Awareness**

We didn't get here to the state of our current infrastructure overnight. It took us decades. It took us a generation to get here. The report card obviously is a tool to help convey the condition so everybody understands what we're talking about and the impact on our lives. While we've been doing it now for some time, it has taken time to build that momentum, to build the understanding so that, today, it is being regularly used as a communication point and regularly used to help drive the conversation at all political levels: at the state, federal and local levels. They're using it. They're recognizing that, "Wow this is a tool we can use. It helps communicate with the challenges and what the needs are." The next step is getting that action, getting the legislation, getting the additional funding. While you could argue that there hasn't been a significant step, there actually has been quite a lot of effort being put into improving our infrastructure. We're seeing that at the state and local level, it's just that federal level that we're really challenged by but even at the federal government level, we're starting to see signs of increased investment and improved policies in terms of how we invest in our infrastructure.

### **Reasons for Optimism: Infra Support at High Levels**

On the bill and infrastructure package that the president released, we were and are optimistic in that we have a president who is talking about infrastructure investment as a driver for our economy and has actually taken a step to deliver a package to lay out his plan or his thoughts on how we might invest in infrastructure. As a result, we're optimistic that he's talking about it, he's pushing it forward. It was, at least at the time, a priority for him. The basis of the optimism is that there is something out there, there is a package and there is good discussion going on about it.

### **The Challenge: Moving from Broad Support to Real Action**

[Infrastructure investment] is a lot more than just presidential interest and engagement in it. It does require political will at all levels. That was one of the challenges with the package that the president brought out. There were some areas of concern. Congress would ultimately need to take it up and work through those areas. Do they have the interest and the will to do that? Definitely a concern. The good news on the public engagement is that, generally, the public supports increased infrastructure investment. They understand the impact on their lives. They understand that when we invest in infrastructure it actually helps their personal pocket book, but it also helps their quality of life. There is support there. The challenge is getting infrastructure into a place where it's being acted on, where we can start to push forward or we can start to have that conversation and really get the investment happening at the federal level. At the state and local levels we've already started to see the political will there where the politicians and communities are taking it in to their own hands and they're saying, "We need to invest in our infrastructure." Now the critical piece is getting the federal government to do the same.

## **The Public Plays a Huge Role in Shaping Infra Policy**

The role of citizens is huge. Whether it's engineers, because we know exactly the impact of the infrastructure and the challenges of the infrastructure; or my parents, or my brother and my sister, we citizens help drive priorities of Congress. Having worked there, it's very clear that when the public says it's time to invest, investment happens. When the public says it's time to change a policy, that policy becomes front and center as something that congress will start to work on. Now the outcome may not always be what the public is desiring, but at least it becomes a priority. We've seen that with infrastructure, again, at the state and local level when there's a failure, all of a sudden the public comes out and they say, "This doesn't work and you have to fix this." The politicians do prioritize, so the public has a huge rule in helping shape priorities of our elected leaders.

## **Why Transportation Often Tops the List**

Transportation is the one piece of infrastructure that I feel the public interacts with the most and understands the most. Our drinking water system, our waste water systems: we rely on them and they're something that we just expect to work. And as long as they do work we're fine, but when we get on the road or get on the train, or get on the transit or the bus, when we get out of our houses and start going to work, school, play, we feel the impact of the transportation system so critically. Because of that, we've seen over half of the states increase their fuel tax because the public has been pushing and they've been saying, "You need to fix this." Now the challenge is, how do you increase it enough to meet the incredible growing needs of our urban communities? That's a huge challenge, and it's something definitely that you can see in major urban cities like New York City.

## **Funding Transportation: Increasing the Fuel Tax**

The best way to fund our infrastructure is really looking at a user-pay. It's how our infrastructure is currently primarily funded. Whether it's paying for a power bill or paying for a water bill or paying for a sewer bill or paying for fuel or buying a pass to get on a transit system, it's that user-pay system. The Highway Trust Fund is underfunded and it's the largest piece of the infrastructure deficit that we see on our report card. Of the two trillion dollars additional investment needed in the next ten years, one trillion of that is in surface transportation. The quickest, easiest way to increase that investment is an increase in the fuel tax and an increase in the federal fuel tax. That's the quickest way. There are challenges with that, long term. We fully recognize that and are supportive of other funding mechanisms being developed to ultimately transition as fuel tax changes as we start to have more fuel-efficient cars or even alternative energies, looking at the electric vehicles. But right now, the quickest way is to increase the federal fuel tax.

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