InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Fundamental Changes to the Way Americans View Cities

I think there are a variety of very seismic forces that have been occurring in the American economy and America culturally which are driving to questions about cities. Historically, America has always understood itself and its future somewhat within the model of moving away from town, moving away from cities. That all has now flipped itself on its head in that more and more people are now moving back into cities. They're staying in cities and cities are growing in ways that we probably didn't expect 20-25 years ago when the sub-urban model or the exurban model was where we thought our future was going to be. That is a huge cultural shift for the United States.

At the same time, I think the reason why the conversation about transit is so front and center here in New York, is because it is the only way you really can see and understand how the city's going to work and survive. By that, I mean that for a lot of historical luck and coincidences, this incredible three-part system was put together 100 years ago, even more. It was there, but it was never really understood to be the fundamental backbone of a way a city could function effectively. It was really much more a matter of just commuting patterns of, "This is how I get to work. This is how I get around." Now, it undergirds so many of the social questions that cities are facing: public safety, people's sense of neigh-borhoods, people's sense of mobility and moving into other neighborhoods, breaking down barriers of communities, sustainability in terms of air quality, in terms of congestion. Then, fundamentally about the whole idea of the viability of a city and how cities are going to have to function.

Before, I think we all always thought, "Well, if the city's not working, we can leave and move out to the country." That's the classic model in America. That's no longer the case. There's no place to escape to anymore and unless we can figure out how cities are going to work—and mass transit is clearly one of the key components of that, because the car, the truck is just too debilitating to the quality of life within a city. You look at the emerging Western cities, whether it's Seattle, whether it's Portland, Austin, Texas, Denver—all of them are struggling with the fact that their car-truck network on the highways is completely insufficient for meeting the needs of an urban center. New York happens to be the largest test tube where all those questions are getting asked at one time.

If Infra Disasters Don't Motivate Us, What Will?

I've grown so weary of that whole tired adage of, "Boy, if we just had a disaster, we'd really all rally together and come up with a major infrastructure agenda." One in particular I think is just so historically ironic is the collapse of the bridge in Minneapolis and I-35 and the loss of lives. At that very moment, you had the most powerful congressman, from Minnesota, Oberstar, leading the national debate on infrastructure. If there ever was that one moment where a disaster would motivate Congress, that surely was going to be it and nothing happened. A disaster is not yet capable of motivating people to rally behind infrastructure. This has been true of America for years.

I don't think that there's a disaster that's going to happen. I think that Americans are slowly, inevitably going through a cultural shift that recognizes that their future, and the quality of their life, and their economic life is so inextricably now tied to the health of cities and cities are fundamentally defined by infrastructure that you're beginning to see the little sprouts across the country—on a local level, not on a federal level—where people are willing to pay for the kind of things that they need to build a better city. Seattle passes a $52 billion bond act for mass transit. LA does the big $150 billion. Denver's done it. I think, slowly, that cultural awareness and knowledge is emerging. Cities are our future and they're not working the way we've always thought of them. Infrastructure has to be re-solved that way.

Infrastructure Is Not a Standalone Problem

I think a lot of it has to start locally. I think Americans face this terrible conundrum of pitting issues against issues rather than understanding issues comprehensively. For all of his credit, Obama created an incredible initiative to pass healthcare. The country was ex-hausted from it by the time it was done and now it's getting unwound. We're going through these convulsions of how historic pensions are sapping wealth or sapping funding.

The problem is until Americans see infrastructure as an economic driver to help solve those other economic problems, transportation and infrastructure get pushed out. People think about their healthcare, their educations for their children, their long-term retirement and pensions. By the time you hit infrastructure, everyone's exhausted and they think it's this separate standalone problem that, "Well if we had the money, we'd really be able to take care of it."

The point is, those other four that are on top of it, all rely on that infrastructure functioning smoothly and far smoother than it is. I think Americans are beginning to see it. That's the only way out of this because if you ask people to choose between sitting in congestion or knowing that they have healthcare, they'll pick healthcare. Healthcare is not independent of solving the congestion problem.

Leveraging Technology for 21st Century Funding

Currently, I'm the Metro Executive for AECOM. AECOM, obviously, is a large, large, large architectural and engineering company. I like to think what I'm only doing is the other side of what I used to do when I was in government, which is how do you build infrastructure? Whether it's water, wastewater, transportation, economic development projects, how do you build that infrastructure? Now I'm working for a company that helps government do that. We design them, we engineer them, we figure out how you can, in some cases, price them. We actually own a construction company that can help build them. I feel as if I'm somewhat towards the end of my career, that all I'm doing in the private sector is trying to help the public sector get done what I used to do when I was working for the Port Authority or when I was Bloomberg's Environmental Commissioner at DEP.

I think the reason why I'm optimistic—people always asked me that question. The answer I like to give is, regardless of one's faith, that the rigor and the accountability of why you believe what you believe in, should be the most serious thing you decide to undertake. That makes me optimistic because if people think hard and think realistically and are clear on why they think the way things should be, we can make progress. It's when we get lost with false slogans, when we get lost with misapplied analogies. Those are the things that stand in the way of people, I think, making good decisions in their own economic self-interest in a democratic way to help build better cities.

To me, the number one challenge, though, is fundamentally that we need a new model for funding. We need a way to think about how you take wealth out of the economy and apply it to the things we really need. We're still stuck in pricing models—taxation, tolls—that are very much post World War II and are not yet really the 21st century. I think we need to see a wave of creativity in terms of technology helping us pull money out of the economy the way tolls used to. Tolls have now reached the end of their useful life. You properly can't raise tolls in the New York-New Jersey region any further; the public just won't put up with it. We have to find more creative ways. I think if people are honest, you can do that. I think technology gives us an opportunity to answer that question.

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