

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

James Corless, Director, Transportation For America

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

James Corless:

Inciting action

What will it take to get the public up off the couch and really care and honestly pressure their decision makers to do something to act? I think there are a couple of things that are going on. I think the first thing, which is certainly one that many, many of us are trying to figure out, is everybody depends on transportation every single day. In many ways it's in front of our face, but it's hidden in plain sight. I don't think that there is yet enough resonance with the public compared to things like the economy, national security, jobs, the environment, health care, there just hasn't been enough resonance. At the end of the day, it's often a very local issue; it's not seen necessarily as something that rises to the level of national policy. That's the challenge. I think the opportunity, and Transportation for America thinks the opportunity, is number one to bring some new people to the table. That's exactly what we're doing. We have a coalition now of 475 partners that include everyone from the American Public Health Association to the National Association of Realtors to AARP. These are organizations that aren't on transportation day in and day out, but transportation is essential to their constituents and to their bottom line. We believe this debate around transportation and national transportation policy needs some new life. It needs to be reinvigorated. We are doing just that, and we think that we need some of these new partners at the table and in the mix. The other thing I would say from having been a transportation practitioner for many years, part of it is a lot of the transportation industry, and frankly that we've failed to connect with the American public. We've gotten very wonky over the years. We tend to talk in terms of acronyms and funding programs and very arcane and outdated and scientific and very unimaginative language. I think part of what we bring at Transportation for America to this debate is really a way to connect with people, to connect with voters and to talk about these things in plain English. I think frankly we all need to do more of that. We need to think of ourselves writ large as a political candidate, and we've got to win a campaign for office. That's the challenge in front of us.

"It's in our hands."

Transportation for America and the state DOTs and some of the other industry groups, we believe that we're at a moment much like we were in the 1950s before the Interstate Highway Act. We need some leadership as President Eisenhower provided that leadership. We need some vision, and we need to connect transportation to these larger national issues like jobs, energy security and our dependence on oil as we've seen out of the BP spill. It's really been these times in our history, even back to the transcontinental railroad and uniting the country. We're at a point in our history; It's in our hands. That is both our challenge and our opportunity. If we don't make transportation about more than just concrete and steel and acronyms then we're in danger of losing the opportunity.

The cost of backing down from infra challenges

People ask me all the time, how can you advocate for revenue, increase a gas tax in an economy where people are already paying a lot for gas and people are struggling to make ends meet? Certainly we have to be mindful of not just simply taxing people to raise money, but actually raising revenue to invest long term. We're all already paying. The American people are already paying. We're paying by the time that we sit in traffic. We're paying by the time that we don't make it home for dinner to spend that time with our kids. We're paying with the lack of options, the lack of viable public transportation options for seniors in the aging baby-boom demographic. We're paying by not being able to develop more infill and transit-oriented communities and development that are closed to more walkable options in public transportation. We're already paying an enormous amount of tax. And if we don't solve our infrastructure problems by the way, the non user fee side of the ledger which is already about fifty percent in terms of property tax, we're just going to see those local taxes rise and rise and rise over time if we don't get this right.

Infra Education: Connecting the dots

It is about connecting the dots. The good news is the challenge is we have to make people connect the dots. They have to do that. You have to lead them a little bit. We've done polling around energy and oil dependence, and most Americans, I don't think, connect the spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the BP spill, with a dysfunctional transportation system and infrastructure. Yet the two are very linked. The good news in our polling, as soon as you begin to say "Photovoltaic panels or solar panels are wonderful but they won't do a thing to get us off oil" – seventy percent of our oil is consumed by the transportation sector – as soon as you begin to make that connection, people begin to get it. We've got a big education task in front of us, but that is the opportunity. It doesn't take a lot for people to begin to connect those dots. But we all collectively have to begin to connect them.

Yes! High-speed rail

I don't think it's any coincidence that the Obama administration has made their one signature push around high-speed rail. States also, by the way, are going to have to do a lot of the high speed rail, so the state DOTs, I think that is their 21st century transportation in their portfolio. These things are regional by nature. I think it's captured the American public's imagination. It is not a panacea, and we'll be the first to say that. We won't solve all of our transportation problems just by building high-speed rail. It is actually going to do a lot for economic development, for linking the economic engines, the metropolitan regions of the country together, providing some redundancy and resiliency in the system that we badly need even though airlines and aviation will continue to be a major form of interregional travel. There will be no way we can handle the demand for those kind of three to five hundred mile trips in the future just through airlines alone. So the next transportation bill in Congress, we believe as T4America, must emphasize high-speed rail as part of this new vision for the future. Much as it should, I would say, emphasize the growing opportunities around technology. It's easy to say that, but intelligent transportation systems both managing highways better but also making public transportation better through scheduling and cell phones and real time information. Those are the exciting cutting edge things that I think we need to reconnect with the American people about.

Citizens need to see a clear vision for transportation

The transportation bill in Congress has traditionally been a bipartisan bill. There are no red or blue potholes, there are just potholes. Having said all of that, I think, both parties and all political persuasions, we're at a point in time where on a state level and a federal level, our typical reaction, is to put our hand out and ask for more money. Simply to ask for more money. And that gets back to a notion of a vision, to the enthusiasm around things like high-speed rail. I think we actually have to reestablish trust with the American people and give them a new vision for the future, and tell them that this is not merely spending, this is an investment. We won't do that simply by saying, "boy we're really short on money and we need \$120 billion just to keep pace." That's not going to excite people, especially with the kind of fiscal anxieties that exist out there. Asking simply for more money for transportation is putting the cart before the horse. We've got to sell people on a vision and we've got to reestablish their trust.

**www.InfrastructureUSA.org
212.414.9220
info@infrastructureusa.org**