

Builder

Grid Block: Why Isn't Housing 'Infrastructure?'

Affordable housing should rank among America's priorities around improved roads, bridges, tunnels, railways, shipping channels, pipelines, power grids, and airports.

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Holiday season is upon us. Also, a new group of people--many of whom will be in their first government positions--has gotten to work on chronic challenges, hoping, finally, to free them of paralyzing, inertial, negating force.

A point of focus, of growing expectation, and of hope is talk of an enormous investment in the nation's infrastructure. Estimates range from \$550 billion to a \$1 trillion in scope.

Naturally, prospects for such an initiative draw out both heady optimism and a fair-share of fretting and fear, and that's even before they're solidified and make their way through the reality-check of Congressional approval. Huge spending is not a slam dunk even if two of the United States' three branches of executive government are politically aligned.

Still, it's hard to contain the impulse to imagine the jobs, the sense of collective purpose, the gratification of seeing projects bear fruit, resulting in better bridges, roads, rail systems, tunnels, energy distribution, etc.

The "etc." is worth discussing.

Here, a [Washington Post](#) piece--with spectacular visualizations of America's infrastructure in six separate maps--by graphics reporter Tim Meko, offers two viewpoints to the up-to-now generalized nature of president-elect Donald Trump's talk of a major infrastructure investment, one of them coming from Randal O'Toole, a Cato Institute senior fellow.

Brian Pallasch, the managing director of government relations and infrastructure initiatives at the American Society of Civil Engineers, says that Trump's lack of specificity about his plans is a good thing. "It allows for the infrastructure community to have more input as the administration develops the plan, allowing us to have a broader conversation," he said.

O'Toole disagrees. "The problem with a top-down solution such as Trump's proposal is that one size doesn't fit all. Different kinds of infrastructure have different kinds of needs, and the financial solution will be different for each one," he said.

What's more, speaking of "different kinds of infrastructure," why isn't housing regarded as infrastructure? Think about it. Here's a note from an organization out of Glasgow, Scotland, called Homeless World Cup.

On a single night in January 2013, there were 610,042 people experiencing homelessness. Homelessness has declined by 9% since 2007 (HUD, 2013). However, unofficial estimates of total homelessness range from 1.6 million to 3.5 million (NCH, 2009), and in 2013, 2,483,539 children experienced homelessness (NCFH, 2014).

The thought of housing as infrastructure is not a new one. Affordable housing developers and advocates have pushed for this thinking for years.

A 2010 paper from land use expert attorney and academic James A. Kushner, published in *The Urban Lawyer*, states:

"Affordable housing should be viewed as infrastructure with an adequate supply assured through planning and administration just as communities assure the availability of adequate retail, office, industry, schools, or streets.

He Kushner later notes:

A single housing project in Seattle created to house homeless men replaced more than 1200 days spent in jail and 1100 visits made to hospitals and medical centers by its occupants in the year prior to occupancy, an annual cost savings to the taxpayer of \$3.5 million.

Separately, a January 31, 2014 article in United Kingdom-based The Guardian by Hannah Fearn, adds to this argument. Fearn writes:

When it comes to policymaking, housing has an identity crisis. What is housing? Is it a human right, like our universal commitment to the right to an education? Or is it infrastructure? Today, it is neither.

Unlike most European countries, the [British] Treasury does not consider housing to be part of its national infrastructure brief. This means that we have little national oversight of our housing needs, and no coherent national plan for new development.

And, she concludes:

Serious consideration of the economic benefit of housing – just like rail networks, roads and the National Grid – can't come soon enough.

What do you think? If you don't ask, and you don't make a good business case for it these days, it's not going to happen.