

Don't Forget to Put the "E" in the Word Infrastructure

When I was an Executive in an electric utility, (one without any gas business at the time), my colleagues and I rarely used the work infrastructure. We talked about the "wires" or the T&D system. At that time, without thinking about it much, we probably considered infrastructure to be roads, rails and bridges - and we were probably in the majority in terms of how people viewed the term. I suppose if we did think about it, we would have of course considered the electricity system to be not only infrastructure, but critical public infrastructure as well, but that wasn't front-of-mind.

Which brings me to what I see as good news and bad news. First, infrastructure as an area of policy and - in all likelihood - funding, is red hot. That is good. But the bad news is that electricity may not be sufficiently embedded in the infrastructure mindset.

Don't get me wrong. It's not black and white in terms of electricity being in or out of the infrastructure family anymore. A lot of us within and outside of the electricity sector now talk about electricity infrastructure. We talk about the need to modernize and invest in electricity infrastructure, and we talk about the grid being high on the list of critical infrastructure, whether from a physical or cyber security standpoint, or from the standpoint of resiliency.

But when you hear both sides of the Congressional aisle talk about doing an infrastructure bill in the coming Congress, I don't think they are thinking of an electric substation or smart meter. Their mind's eye for infrastructure is in fact transportation, and the bridges and roads that are needed in their states and district, and the jobs that come with them. In fact, if you asked someone who works in either a state legislature or Congress how infrastructure is handled, they might say "we do a highway bill every so-many years". Indeed, if there is going to be an infrastructure bill in the next session of Congress, the primary jurisdiction over it will be the Transportation Committees in both the House and Senate.

I know that electricity infrastructure is not all in the hands of Congress. A lot of electricity infrastructure has always been handled via utility rate cases or some other regulatory proceeding. But is that going to continue as it has? While it is clear that some critical infrastructure is almost certainly going to be owned and operated by a

utility for some time to come, the modern grid and electricity system may have going to have all sorts of new types of infrastructure owned by all sorts of entities. So it may be that a lot of infrastructure policy and funding will begin to pop out of the standard regulatory channel in the coming decade and follow a different path.

But the word as of when I write this is that there will be a fast track infrastructure bill in Congress within the first few months of the session. But here is another interesting tidbit, courtesy of some leaked emails - energy was almost left out of the 2009 Stimulus Bill.

All of us in the electricity sector and community should not take for granted that electricity will be considered infrastructure as infrastructure policy is made and infrastructure dollars are handed out. Just because we use it more among ourselves these days doesn't mean that policymakers will do the same. We will need to fight against long-standing institutional channels that are focused on other kinds of infrastructure. For example, we should strive to turn that "I" in the SGIG Grants that were part of the 2009 Stimulus Act (ARRA) from "investment" into "infrastructure" and look for other ways to join the party. We really ought to mount a conscious effort, coordinated or ad hoc, that makes sure our electricity voice is heard.

Words change their meaning, and words come and go and get hot and cold. Let's go with the flow and join the infrastructure party. I hear that they may be giving out really nice goodie bags.

Dan is the President of Wedgemere Group. Follow him on Twitter [@dandelurey](https://twitter.com/dandelurey).