Future of Infrastructure podcast

Episode:

Host: Jeremy Goldberg

Guest: Laura Tolkoff

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**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Welcome to the future of infrastructure. I’m Jeremy Goldberg, Worldwide Director of Critical Infrastructure at Microsoft, and I’m on a journey to learn more about how infrastructure is being built around the world, by talking with public servants, philanthropist, artists and place-makers who have spent their lives working in the public interest. This is a series to help us build things and plan for the future, while putting people first.

So I’m thrilled to be at the SPUR Urban Center in downtown San Francisco today, and joined by Laura Tolkoff, the Transportation Policy Director at SPUR, one of my most favorite organizations and favorite people. So Laura, it’s so great to see you.

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** Thank you so much. Thank you for having me.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So before we dive into our questions, share with the audience a bit of your background, what motivates you, what’s driven you over your career to really dedicate yourself to public service into these issues.

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** Sure. Well, I can’t quite trace my interest in this work to one specific moment, but my desire to work in the public interest started pretty young. I grew up understanding that we have an obligation to leave the world better than we found it, and with an understanding of our interconnectedness, whether it’s through ecological linkages, or through the inheritance of trauma between generations.

And my family history gave me a clear sense that the government could really change the trajectory of people’s lives for good or for bad. So I was always trying to figure out how can the government do more good.

When I started getting into urban policy and planning, I did not start out in transportation. I was a bit of a sampler. But I’m grateful that I eventually found my way into transportation policy, largely because of the inspiration and leadership of your earlier guest, Rami Amin.

And I think transportation policy is so important because of the ways it shapes the way we live. And sometimes that pattern is invisible. So I see it as my job to really try and make those patterns visible.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I love that. I mean, taking something, that’s right, that people may take for granted.

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** Exactly.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** It’s the systems that operate, you know, our transportation systems, let’s say, and make those visible to people, because typically, right, they only see them when they’re not working –

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** Exactly.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** - or they’ll acknowledge it, yeah.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Right. So how many times have you thought twice about letting your child ride a bike to school, because there’s too many cars on the road? Or think about parents who, you know, have to be many things for their children, are also their primary source of transportation.

Or, I think about all the hours I spend driving around my children, because there’s no other way for them to get where they need to go. And then think about how that impacts the financial security of women, who are statistically more likely to be the primary parent and do most of this unpaid transportation work.

Or you can think about a time when you’ve turned down a job because it was going to take too long or cost too much to get there. Or the times you’ve closed your window because the air outside is too polluted, or cars and trucks make too much noise as they speed by. Or how many times has your day been upended because the bus or train was late or broken down?

And so, every few months, I’m reminded pretty clearly why I do this work. A few months ago, my husband called me saying that, as they were walking to preschool, he and my son were hit by a car and that the car drove off. Luckily, they were okay, but I don’t want any other parent to have to get that call.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I’m happy they’re okay. I liked the term you use, sampler. So you spent some time in New York. You’ve spent some time at RPA, and you have this, you know, home here in the Bay Area and this home here at SPUR. Share a bit more about where and how SPUR really is that right place for you to take all of this energy, this mission orientation that you have, and to make that positive change, and maybe kind of weave in like what SPUR’s mission and work is all about?

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** SPUR stands for the San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association. But nobody calls us that. We just go by SPUR.

And SPUR is a nonprofit public policy organization founded by a group of civic leaders in 1906, who were really determined to rebuild their city, to really rebuild San Francisco after the earthquake and fire that devastated the city.

What’s fascinating is that today, there are really only three organizations like it in the country, that have this history of being born out of civic leaders. And I’ve had the great privilege of working for two of them. So it’s wonderful to be here at SPUR.

So SPUR is based in San Francisco, San Jose, and Oakland, which are the three biggest cities in the San Francisco Bay Area, and we’re recognized as a leading civic planning organization and really respected for our independent and holistic approach to urban issues.

Our mission is to create an equitable, sustainable, and prosperous region. And we really hold these three values as co-equal and are working to address the policies and public sector systems that contribute to them.

And the way that we do our work is what I think is pretty special. We do it through research, as well as education and advocacy. And what I think is special about SPUR is that it’s really a place where we get together, we bring people together to develop solutions to the big problem cities face. And the value of this way of working is that we’re really bringing people together to have hard conversations about complicated issues, and really learn and problem solve together.

And SPUR fills a pretty unique space. The Bay Area is a place with pretty limited regional government, and a lot of fragmentation and competition between our governments. We have 101 cities, 27 transit agencies, nine counties, and many more that make decisions just in the transportation space. And so, we really fill an important void in representing the collective nature of our problems and our shared interests.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** One of the many things that I’ve always been really, really remarkable about SPUR is the organization’s ability and the people that are a part of it to be a great convener.

And the numbers that you talk about, and the competing agendas of all these different cities and governments across the region, you know, to be able to pursue what the mission is, you know, the equitable, sustainable, prosperous region, what an undertaking, what a challenging undertaking.

Just as you think through this and pursuit of that mission, there’s the convening part, but what else is SPUR doing to pursue those three key objectives?

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** The basis of the work that we do starts with that research, which starts with the convening. And then, you know, we take it into the space of advocacy, which is where we try and actually implement the ideas that we develop with our partners. And so, that can take the form of working with local governments to implement new policies or develop and influence plans.

We also work with our regional agencies to develop policies and implement them. We also work at the state level, increasingly so at the state level, passing legislation like the one I’ll talk about today, for the benefit of the Bay Area, and also for California more broadly.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** You talk about legislation, which I know you’re very excited about this. And 2020 was a very interesting year for all of us globally. There are also some glimmers of hope in this legislation that passed, SB 288, in 2020. We’re going to dive deeply into that legislation because I know you were one of the people that was – you wrote a lot of this legislation. So tell us about it.

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** There are so many ways that transportation shapes our lives today, and it also affects our future because transportation is the biggest contributor to climate change in California. 40% of our greenhouse gas emissions, and growing, come from transportation, and the vast majority of that is from cars. And if we don’t want catastrophic climate change to lead to the collapse of pretty much every system we know, we have to do something about transportation, and we have to do it fast.

I’m going to talk about Senate Bill 288, or SB 288, which is a law authored by Senator Scott Wiener, who represents District 11, including San Francisco and some parts of San Mateo County, in the California State Senate. He’s an incredible champion for climate and equity. And we co-sponsored the law, along with our partners at the Bay Area Council, the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, LA Metro and the California Transit Association.

So SB 288 essentially streamlines clean transportation projects and active transportation projects from the California Environmental Quality Act, which I’ll get into in a moment. And it focuses on things that are already in the public right of way, so already in – in the street and places that are – have been built out. And it focuses on things like sidewalks, bicycle infrastructure, bus transit, making buses more reliable, relatively small, commonsense infrastructure that we really need to move more sustainably and to achieve our climate equity and health goals in the state.

The origin of SB 288 is actually in SPUR’s regional strategy, which is a 50-year civic vision for the San Francisco Bay Area, really led with purpose and backed with policy. A key premise is that if we’re serious about limiting and reducing our greenhouse gas emissions and wanting to improve health equity, we have to really make it possible for more people to make most of their trips without a car. So we need more protected bicycle lanes, we need more buses that are fast and reliable and not stuck in traffic, and we need sidewalks.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I can only imagine how long it must have taken in terms of the legislation and the process, getting these household names, if you’re in California, around the SVLG and the Bay Area Council and LA Metro.

From the start with these concepts, right, to actually get through to pass the legislation, like what was the timeline? How long did that take? And you had to overcome a lot of challenges to actually getting it passed, and what did that look like?

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** So we published our regional strategy in 2020, and pretty quickly after that, realized that we wanted to do more on the advocacy front to take those ideas and put them into action.

So shortly afterwards, we convened a group of people to think about the next legislative session in 2020. And then COVID hit. And the legislative session effectively starts in March and ends in September.

The California Legislative session is really march through September. We were working on this at the very beginning of the pandemic. So it’s March of 2020. A lot of people had just started secluding themselves. They started to rely more on walking and biking, just to stay sane, and certainly to stay as healthy as they could.

A lot of people at this point had lost their jobs, and the unemployment numbers just kept going up. At the time, there was also no federal rescue package. And so, everybody was anticipating needing to really cut public services.

And so, what we were looking to do was to try and use this as an opportunity, as so many cities around the world really did, to really think about how can we use this to transform our transportation network in a clean and sustainable and healthy way.

And we also really cared about how can we also use this to help employ people at the time. So we really wanted to pass a law that would accelerate clean and sustainable transportation projects, and effectively act as a no-cost stimulus for jobs and the economy.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** It’s just such an impressive thing to be able to take a moment like that, like what we were living in and what you were living in and what people were experiencing, and say, we have this regional plan we’re putting in place – that we published, but we’re now going to kind of pivot it just a bit to speak to the moment of what was happening, and have that foresight to say, this is what we’re hearing, what we’re seeing, and seize that moment to push, to get this legislation to a place where it could pass for the betterment of people.

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** Thank you, Jeremy. We published the regional strategy in 2020. It wasn’t a great year to try to predict the future. But it turns out that the things that we needed in this crisis were the same things we needed all along.

And more importantly, a lot of damage is being done to our communities and our climate while we wait around for these projects to get built. Low-income communities and communities of color suffer disproportionately from transportation related pollution and generally have fewer mobility options than wealthier and usually whiter people because of discriminatory housing, lending, and transportation policies.

So when the law makes it hard to actually build better transit and bike lanes, it ends up replicating past environmental injustices. What we wanted to do was pass a law that would really accelerate clean and sustainable transportation projects. It did so by saying these projects are inherently good for the environment, because they reduce driving, and therefore reduce pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

These projects are also more likely to benefit low-income people and people of color directly through new mobility options, or indirectly through reduced pollution.

Not every project can get an exemption. It has to be clean, sustainable transportation, like some of the categories that I mentioned. And for those larger projects, we conditioned the exemption on really making sure that the implementing agency put equity and engagement front of mind.

With the goal of really being intentional about daylighting the benefits and burdens of each project.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** There’s a lot of lessons learned in terms of how you approach this kind of project and the set of projects. And in this case, it’s passing legislation, but it’s far more than that.

Every city, every region is unique. We know. I lived here, I lived in San Francisco. San Francisco is special. That said, what might an audience, in your view, you know, want to know about implementing something like this similarly in their city or region? What are some takeaways about your learnings from this experience?

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** I think one of the takeaways is not to waste a crisis. All over the world, cities have been trying to remake their streets to work better for people. And we’re behind on that here in the United States.

And so I think that’s a really important lesson is to going back to what I said before, well, one of the first things that I would say is that the challenges that we’re facing from this pandemic are the challenges that we had before the pandemic. And, you know, we waited too long to try and solve them, but let’s use this opportunity to make a big difference.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** And on that, I just wanted to jump in here. This point that you reference about talking about our streets and reusing the streets, and I think of five or six years back when city of San Francisco had parklets, right, that were here, and one was right out front here at SPUR. And the concept or the notion of that at this point, I was thinking to myself, am I in a European city? Am I in somewhere else around the globe? And so, that parklet kind of a reimagining of the space, right, is also something that came a bit too a head during the pandemic, and in some cities have now adopted that, right? So I think this is some, again, paving the way in terms of the rethinking and not wasting a crisis, which is a lot of what you and what the team here at SPUR continue to do.

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** Absolutely.

And the second thing I would take away is, there’s probably some law or some policy on the books that is really getting in the way of real progress.

In California, we have some of the most progressive and ambitious climate goals. And yet, we have laws that are not always helping us reach those goals. So I think the story of SB 288 and hopefully SB 922, if it successfully moves through the legislature this year, is that you can do big things by getting the small things right, and really making sure that your laws and your strategies and your programs are moving your communities in the direction you want to go.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Going back to SPUR’s core mission of an equitable, sustainable and prosperous region, I think about those as measures in terms of the desired impact and how you may be evaluating success. With this legislation, is that accurate, or are there other metrics that you’re looking – that you’re looking at?

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** We think that we can overcome resistance or skepticism by demonstrating a positive impact. And one of the things that I’m really proud of is that, in its short life, this law is already having a real and positive impact in communities around California.

About six months after the law went into effect, we conducted a survey with our partners, and found that during that short time, 15 projects were initiated and constructed using SB 288. And most of those are projects that support walking and biking, including slow streets and active transportation, and projects to improve bus speeds and reliability.

Transit agencies and cities in that survey also reported 38 projects that could really benefit from an extension of that law, which is part of the reason we’re pursuing SB 922, to extend the law out to 2030.

Of these, 60% are intended to convert diesel transit fleets into clean transit fleets, which helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution.

The law also played a key role in getting San Francisco to make JFK Drive and Golden Gate Park a car-free promenade. And those are benefits that we saw in six months. We think we’ll see a lot more positive impact with increased federal and state investment in clean transit and active transportation that we’re seeing now.

And the beauty of SB 288 is that it was really a no-cost accelerator. The state didn’t have to spend a dollar more to get these projects on the ground faster. They just got out of the way.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So one of the questions – and commentary that comes from our audience these days that I’m hearing about is, you know, we want an unlocking like what’s in the mind of the experts that we have these discussions with. And not only about what’s past and what’s happening, but what’s ahead. What are you most excited about in terms of opportunities here around in the transportation space that our audience would be privileged to hear from an expert like yourself?

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** I think one of the things I’m most excited about is how organizations and people in the civic sector are working. I think San Francisco is sometimes known for its fragmented politics, but what I’m seeing in the transportation space is a real understanding about the moment of crisis that transit is in, and also the importance of clean and sustainable mobility, and access to our climate, our health, our equity, our ability to live independent and healthy lives, and a real recognition that it’s a very zero-sum game if we can’t set aside our differences and work together. So I’m really energized by the way that my colleagues in this space are working together.

Another thing that I think is exciting here in the Bay Area is that we’ve been talking about fragmentation in transit for decades. We know it’s a source of our challenges for regional mobility, and it’s been hard to figure out what to do about it.

And the pandemic really precipitated a new way of thinking, led by transit operators and by our regional metropolitan planning organization, MTC, to really look at our governance system and think about how could we actually improve this for the benefit of transit riders.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** One final question, what is one thing you’ve read, it does not need to be – if it is, it’s fine as well, but it does not need to be something in the policy arena, but what’s one thing you’ve read, watched or listened to lately that has had an impact on the way you’re thinking about these issues in technology, this moment that we have in infrastructure and recovery, things that are happening here in the Bay Area?

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** Two things, one I’m reading, one I’m listening to. I’m currently reading, *All We Can Save*, which is a collection of essays by women working at the forefront of the climate movement. And it’s a great collection of very hopeful and wise experiences.

The second thing is I am listening to *A Slight Change of Plans*, which is a podcast with Maya Shankar. And it is really focused on the intersection of cognitive science and psychology and policy, and how we think about change and deal with change.

And, you know, for a planner, this is a very unsettling, unanchored time, and it’s just a great reminder to think about ow we move forward in a time of uncertainty and change from a really human dimension.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I’m adding *A Slight Change of Plans* to my podcast list right now. So, what an exceptional like set of recommendations in *All We Can Save*, which is an area also as well that we know, central to the way that we’re building back, right, to use the Building Back Better moniker of sorts from the federal government in the U.S., but truly like two areas that are of integral importance for the way that we build back our cities for people.

So, Laura, thank you so, so much for having the time to sit down, to talk and discuss many of these issues. You can do the big things by beginning with the small things, right, and – and grow from there, and so many important takeaways, but thank you so much for your leadership and hosting me here at SPUR.

**LAURA TOLKOFF:** Thank you so much. It was really a joy.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Thanks for listening to this episode and being a part of the *Future of Infrastructure*, and for joining me on this journey to meet and learn from the people improving life in their communities.

If you liked today’s episode and want to help other people find it, please take a moment to share, rate, and review the show.

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