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Mayors Appear Increasingly Concerned About Infrastructure.

More than half of mayors discussed it during their annual State of the City addresses this year — double the number four years ago.

SPEED READ:

- Infrastructure was the second-most popular topic in mayors' annual addresses this year.
- Twice as many talked about infrastructure than in 2016.
- On the federal level, prospects for an infrastructure package have dimmed.

As the prospects for a federal infrastructure package this year become vanishingly thin, mayors are becoming more concerned about infrastructure in their own cities.

More than half of mayors (57 percent) discussed infrastructure at length during their annual State of the City addresses this year, according to a new report by the National League of Cities (NLC). That made it the second-most popular topic for the second year in a row, trailing only economic development.

It's no surprise that infrastructure ranks high among mayors' concerns. After all, there aren't many problems more commonly associated with local government than potholes and leaky pipes. But mayors are talking about it more often than in recent years. Only 31 percent of mayors discussed infrastructure in their annual speeches in 2016, climbing to 48 percent in 2017 and reaching roughly 60 percent in the last two years, the NLC noted.

"Infrastructure improvements are often not all that visible to the general public. They don't typically garner a great deal of attention — though their failure certainly does," Mayor Patrick Madden of Troy, N.Y., told residents. "Nonetheless, they are essential to preserve our assets and ensure the continued reliability of services and quality of life to our residents."

More Than Roads

The most popular infrastructure topics in the mayoral addresses were roads, streets and signs. But mayors also highlighted their work in other areas.

Roughly a third of them mentioned water infrastructure, pedestrian facilities or infrastructure spending. Nearly a quarter mentioned public transit.

Topics that are closely related to infrastructure were popular, too: 63 percent of mayors mentioned parks and recreation, while 41 percent discussed energy and the environment, according to the report.

In Niagara Falls, N.Y., for example, Mayor Paul Dyster pushed for streetscapes that accommodate all kinds of users — not just auto traffic.

“Having a Complete Streets plan recognizes that our streets belong to everyone — pedestrians and cyclists as well as motorists — and so [it] enhances safety and improves aesthetic appeal and the quality of life in our neighborhoods,” he said in his annual address.

Infrastructure Problems

Mayors gathered in Washington, D.C., last week to discuss the report and how they’re handling infrastructure in their cities.

Mayor Lily Mei of Fremont, Calif., said her town is trying to prepare for the arrival of a new Facebook campus and the strain it will put on local roads. At the same time, the city is working with the school district to encourage students to walk and take alternative modes of transportation to school.

“If you want the students to be able to take public transportation, it requires conscientious programs, such as giving them bus passes [and] teaching them how to ride,” she said.

For Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson of Gary, Ind., one of the biggest infrastructure challenges is the “transformation of public housing.” The housing authority there tore down 500 units in the last six months, as demand for them waned and the apartments fell into disrepair. But the condition of the remaining units is still a concern, she says. When she gets complaints, she not only visits the units herself, she insists that the director of the housing authority join her.

“I want him to see — I want his managers to understand — that it’s important that people not only have a roof over their heads, but they have a place that they can call home,” she said.

In the suburban Florida community of Miramar, near Miami, Mayor Wayne Messam said he is concerned about the impacts of climate change and sea level rise.

“Many South Florida communities have to elevate the streets. We have to fortify our utility systems. Currently right now in Miramar, we’re spending over a hundred million dollars in our infrastructure to improve our water distribution systems,” he said.

That White House Meeting

The mayors shared their infrastructure concerns a day after a White House meeting on infrastructure ended abruptly. President Donald Trump left the room after just a few minutes of meeting with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, both Democrats.

The trio had planned to talk about how to pay for a \$2 trillion infrastructure plan, but the prospects of that happening during Trump’s first term have now all but evaporated.

The mayors said their work would have to continue, despite the federal inaction.

“While some people are taking a pause,” said Mei, the Fremont mayor, “we can’t just sit there and wait for the action to happen.”

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