**Public Sector Future WWPS Podcast**

**Detail: Future of Infrastructure**

**Episode: TBD**

**Host: Jeremy Goldberg**

**Guest: Tom Wright, RPA**

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**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Welcome to the Future of Infrastructure, a part of Microsoft’s Public Sector Future series. 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.

People who come to New York should enter a palace on the end of their ride and not a shed. Here I am in Grand Central Terminal in New York City, East 42nd and Park Avenue with Tom Wright, President CEO of the Regional Plan Association.

Tom, it’s great to be here with you today.

**TOM WRIGHT:** Yeah, thanks. It’s great to be here with you, Jeremy.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So, Vanderbilt Hall, here in this beautiful gallery of history, the architectural sketches of New York, and this incredibly special moment for RPA. And it seems natural, just right, fitted, suited that Grand Central, the place that connects, that’s a central space, connects the suburbs, Westchester, Connecticut to New York, that this is the space to host The Constant Future.

**TOM WRIGHT:** Yeah. We were really excited to have a chance to bring this show, this exhibit to Grand Central Terminal. We wanted to celebrate, we wanted to do something big to talk about RPA’s centennial.

It was in the spring of 1922 that a bunch of civic, and business and political leaders came together to launch the Committee on the regional plan, which became Regional Plan Association, and subsequently four major regional plans. And we were thinking about where – the thing about RPA is were like the best kept secret in New York. People don’t know. They just kind of think that New York sprung up with its highways, and bridges and networks, its park systems, its communities, without any intention, without any design behind it.

And the truth is that Regional Plan Association, as a private, nonprofit, civic group, no mandate, no charter, we have no weight of law behind anything we say, but for a hundred years, we’ve been doing research, and talking to communities, and thinking about the future, and preparing these long-range plans. And we wanted to share them, and there’s just no better place to do it in Grand Central Terminal.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I believe someone has said, “If you know, you know.” (Laughter.)

**TOM WRIGHT:** Yeah, yeah, that’s James Sanders, who’s the brilliant curator we hired to pull the show together, likes to quote, as he puts it, the young people that describe it that way. And the truth is, like, if you studied urban planning in graduate school, you’ve studied the regional plans. If you’re in real estate, or transportation, or urban design in New York, you know about regional plans. Frankly, if you work in London, or Shanghai or Paris, you’ve heard about the regional plan. But to many New Yorkers, it’s absolutely new.

So, we wanted to share this incredibly rich history with folks, talk about the work that we’ve done in give them a preview of what we think the future is going to bring.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So, as we were walking through, you know, this gallery here in Vanderbilt Hall, tell us a little more about yourself. And I look at the captions on some of these port – these exhibits, The Big Idea, The Dream City, Looking Forward, Looking Back. What got you into this work? What inspired you? What was the moment that you realized, like, this is where you were going to dedicate your time and your career?

**TOM WRIGHT:** (Laughter.) That’s a great question. So in college, I was studying a lot of architecture and taking courses in it and thinking maybe I wanted to try and be an architect, but also studying economics, and comparative politics and kind of interested in public policy.

And when I studied the architecture classes, you know, you look at the extraordinary Frank Lloyd Wright or Zaha Hadid, or the brilliance of the creativity, and you think, wow, I could never beat that. (Laughter.) But then you study urban planning, and you and Robert Moses and, you know, and urban renewal, and the highways and things, and you thought, what were they thinking?

And so, to some degree, I think I kind of moved from architecture into urban design and then urban planning, because I really thought this is where – I was kind of moving upstream in the decision-making process. It’s the planners who lay out the – where the development is going to go, what’s going to be protected and preserved where the infrastructure goes, that then other folks come in and fill in the blanks.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** With a bit of art and science oriented into this. Do you have an art background before you were at (crosstalk/laughter/inaudible)?

**TOM WRIGHT:** (Laughter.) Well, my mother’s actually an artist, and my father’s a lawyer. So maybe urban planning is kind of the perfect synthesis of all that. So it called to me to get to get involved at this – at this stage and things.

I was then very fortunate. I ended up coming to Columbia for my graduate studies. Bob Yarrow, who was at the time, the Executive Director at RPA, was teaching a course in metropolitan studies. And I instantly thought, this is what I’m interested in.

I’d grown up as a kid, I lived on the Upper West Side for a while. Then I’d lived in New Jersey, and my life story, in some ways, is kind of the story of the last 50 years of the New York metropolitan region. We were, from 1975 to 2000, a suburbanizing region. Ninety percent of the jobs created in the region were outside New York City. We were building highways at a rate of 25 miles of limited- access highway every single year, even as we were allowing the subways to go into decline.

But somehow, you know, around 2000, and interestingly, 9/11, which we know was an enormous challenge to us, and I really credit the Bloomberg administration, and Mayor Bloomberg and the incredible team that he brought in with him, really, suddenly, the city started to take off. And by 2010, 90% of the new jobs created in the region are in New York City. And we’re suddenly worried about how the suburbs are going to catch up.

But in any case, as somebody who’s kind of a product of New York and its suburbs together, this has been the place I’ve wanted to be.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Is there a New York moment you recall as a kid growing up, because so many of us transplants, right, move here? And you can come from anywhere in the world, and you can become a New Yorker. You earn your right to become one over time. But as someone who grew up in the city, is there a moment that you recall that you think about as like, wow, I live in this city?

**TOM WRIGHT:** (Laughter.) Yeah. What I’d say is, you know, I’m in my almost mid-50s now, and there’s a generational divide. Like, I can remember what New York was like in the 1970’s. You didn’t go into central park after dusk. You really avoided the subways because when you got on a subway car, you didn’t know if it was – if the doors were going to open when you got to the next stop or if you were going to get stranded between stops.

You know, cars had – you took the radios out of your cars, because if you parked a car on Broadway in the middle of daylight, and left it for a few hours, there was a good chance when you came back, somebody had broken in your window and taken it out. So, there was just this level of dysfunction in the city that, you know, kids under 50 just don’t really recall what the city was like.

Now, I don’t think we’re headed back towards that anytime soon. We have concerns about crime, but we are still – we have come so far in the last half century, as a city and a metropolitan region. But then there are things that have been left behind, and there are communities that are still struggling. And we have new threats, like climate change and, of course, affordability.

I mean, what’s happening with the housing crisis right now in our region is not just the usual, oh, it’s expensive to find housing. What we’re talking about is a – I mean, I think the Bay Area kind of confronted this earlier –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Absolutely, right.

**TOM WRIGHT:** And failed, frankly, to address it. And right now, the policies that we have on the table and what we’re doing is guaranteed to fail. We are headed for failure, just the same way a lot of people would say in climate, we are. So, we’ve got to – so, RPA is the group that is going to say, okay, this isn’t working, we got to put some other big ideas on the table. And they might sound crazy right now, but you walk around Vanderbilt Hall, and you look at things that we proposed in 1929 or 1968.

Here’s – here’s an image of Times Square with – that’s pedestrianized.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** It’s pedestrianized, yeah, yeah.

**TOM WRIGHT:** We’ve closed the streets, and we’ve put, you know, cafes and sidewalks out there, and pedestrians. And we put this out in the early 1970’s –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That’s part of RPA being a provocateur and also a futurist, right?

**TOM WRIGHT:** Exactly, exactly. And – and it seemed so far around the bend at the time. And yet, 40 years later, there we are.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Okay.

**TOM WRIGHT:** I wish it had taken 20 years, but – but that’s kind of the role we play.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Well, these projects, programs, initiatives take time, right, in a place where everything is connected, in a city and in this region. And it feels like the perfect tee up for this conversation I know you wanted to have today about the Gateway Program. And as a kid who grew up, right, you mentioned up in the Upper West Side, you moved to Jersey. When we think about, when we’re looking at what’s happening here in the region, let’s dive into the Gateway Program.

**TOM WRIGHT:** Sure.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Your perspectives, your point of view and what this means for the region, the path ahead, and of course, a short summary of what it is, for those who aren’t familiar with it.

**TOM WRIGHT:** Sure, sure. Well, the Gateway Project is right now, probably the largest infrastructure project in the nation moving ahead, currently with support from President Biden to the two governors of New York and New Jersey, Kathy Hochul and Phil Murphy, and Amtrak, and all the way down in city hall here in New York, and everyone. It’s seeds go back a hundred years, or over a hundred years, you know.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I didn’t know that. Okay.

**TOM WRIGHT:** The existing tunnel under the Hudson River that connects New Jersey to New York Penn Station was built by the Penn Railroad about 111 years ago. It moves with the tides. It’s actually not embedded in bedrock, but in the muck underneath the Hudson River. And so, as the tide goes in and out, the tunnel moves.

It flooded during Superstorm Sandy, and saltwater got into that 100-year-old-plus tunnel and is now eating away at the concrete. I’ve gone through it in a special car Amtrak has, where they have kind of, you know, viewing windows and floodlights. And you see the concrete falling away from the walls and puddles of water between the tracks. And when you are at the bottom of the Hudson River in a tunnel, you don’t want to see water there.

So this is aging infrastructure that needs to be fixed. It also though, it kind of sums up all of the challenges that we have with infrastructure in the country. This is not a project that can get delivered within four years or anyone’s election cycle. So, you’re looking to political leaders to support a project that they won’t get to cut the ribbon on. And they know that. That’s asking a lot of them.

It also of course, connects these two states. And both of the states kind of think, well, I have more priorities within my state that I ought to be pushing in front of this.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Sure. People are talking about, what are you doing this month, what are you doing this year, four years, or in this case, could be a 10-to-15-year timeline, right?

**TOM WRIGHT:** Exactly, if we’re lucky.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** If we’re lucky.

**TOM WRIGHT:** So the project has kind of – it’s been talked about for 30-plus years. Planners have always known that we needed to both had more capacity under the Hudson River for rail – this is the Amtrak tunnel we’re talking about that now New Jersey Transit brings in over 100,000 commuters every single day. So, we’ve known that we needed to do this both to create more capacity and so that we would have redundancy in the system. We could put a new tunnel on, and then go and fix the old one and have more capacity.

But it’s enormously complicated. President Trump tried to use it as a political bargaining chip. So for four years, the project was essentially in stasis. But now we have this alignment to try and get it done. But it requires things like where do the people go when they get to New York, because anybody who’s been to Penn Station lately, even post-COVID, knows its handling about three times as many people as it was designed for. The – it doesn’t have its – you know, the corridors and the staircases are cramped, and tight and unsafe. But it also doesn’t have enough platforms and tracks for the trains to come into.

So, we’re going to have to expand Penn Station to create more capacity. We need to fix it so that it’s not a miserable place. It should be more like Grand Central, where we are today, and we have to get everybody on board with, you know, how you allocate who pays how much, who gets how much capacity, what’s the best utilization for it, but realize that this is the weakest link in the chain that runs from Washington, DC to Boston. This is the entire Northeast Corridor, which represents over 20% of the nation’s gross domestic product, is really at danger with this – with the imminent failure of the existing tunnels. So, that’s why we’re so focused on getting the Gateway Project going.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So to summarize, if we had to, in one or two sentences, the desired impact, right? If we look at what this does to transform the region, what are some of the things that you’re sharing with people?

**TOM WRIGHT:** Sure.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That are the impacts that will improve those passengers lives?

**TOM WRIGHT:** When we build – so, I mean, the immediate thing is doubling capacity under the Hudson River. You’re talking about allowing another 100,000 people to make that daily commute. And right now, literally, New York City is still attracting investment with the tech companies, and finance and others still here. But where those people are going to live and how they’re going to get to work is a huge problem.

New Jersey happens to be the place that’s been allowing lots of housing development. Long Island, Connecticut, Westchester have not been allowing that kind of growth because of the land use planning they have.

So the first thing, just building Gateway, is – creating that capacity for I think another 50-to-100 years of growth. But this is also about, in the future, we know – I mean, in a post-COVID world as people work from home more often, which improves their quality of life, what we have to have is a kind of seamless mobility system that allows people to get from where they work to where they live to where they’re enjoying the outdoors and things.

And what Gateway does is it’s not just those 100,000 people. It literally doubles the number of people who are within a 50-minute commute of midtown Manhattan from New Jersey. It makes it so that you could actually decide to live in or around Philadelphia and commute to New York City. And it – it’ll create more connectivity in the entire – what we call the Megalopolis, which is that mega region that stretches, again, from – from Boston to Washington.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So, within – thank you for the explanation on the impacts. It’s very clear that there are operational challenges, there are policy and political challenges, the engineering challenges, which I know nothing about. (Laughter.)

**TOM WRIGHT:** (Laughter.) Are significant.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Significant. And so, the ones that have led to this moment, in terms of challenges and how they were overcome, part of what our audience really enjoys is hearing how you overcome those challenges. What are some things that you could share with us in terms of how this project reached that kind of the greenlit, right, to begin? And, going forward, what are some of the challenges you’ve, the collective, like RPA and others have identified that we know we’ll have to work across industries and with partners to solve?

**TOM WRIGHT:** To try and solve. Well, first, you know, the way we used to do these things in the age of Robert Moses, you just bulldozed a line across the Bronx, and you put in the Cross Bronx Expressway or other things, and, you know, with devastating impacts on communities. And we’ve put in place safeguards and – and laws to make sure that we don’t do that again, and we never should be doing that again.

So, what that means is that when you look at a project like Gateway, you’re going to have community input and involvement at all phases of the project. And – and I focused on the Tunnel, but in some ways, Gateway is really a project that starts in downtown Newark, and it’s doubling capacity all the way from there to Seventh Avenue in Midtown Manhattan.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** In Midtown, yep.

**TOM WRIGHT:** And eventually, it’ll probably – it should extend all the way to Sunnyside, Queens.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Okay.

**TOM WRIGHT:** And so, each step of the way, there are bridges over rivers in New Jersey, but also like the community here in New York City. This is a residential community we’re talking about on the west side, the old Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood. And so, making sure – so the way we do these projects today is to make sure that we have robust public engagement, public discussion, transparency, and – and we change the projects. It’s not just about telling people more what you’ve decided to do, but actually changing your decisions about what to do based on the feedback that you get and improving them.

Now, here’s what I’ll say, actually. I think that in New York, we became much better at doing this post-9/11, because the rebuilding of lower Manhattan after the terrorist attacks engaged everybody in the city, in the region, in the nation, frankly, in the world was interested in what was going on. And it became such – such a part of the discussion in the everyday life.

And what happened, I think, is that New Yorkers became better clients. They became more active and engaged. And part of the idea of why RPA exists is because we believe that when people become more involved in these decisions, we get better outcomes, we get better decisions.

And so, you know, post-9/11, developers hire better architects now. And they don’t try and shortchange the architects, because they know that they’ve got to build something that’s beautiful that people will love. And politicians understand that creating these, the next generation of infrastructure, is something that people want. And so, we’ve seen a real sea change in a lot of this.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Related to that, you know, no city, no region is the same and the – certainly, you know, the boroughs are all different. Certainly, the region is different. Globally speaking, governments are different. What would you say is, like, kind of lessons learned, some takeaways from your work with RPA over the years? Maybe it’s with a Gateway, you know, Project, that folks that are working on these large-scale infrastructure projects could keep in mind as they pursue those endeavors?

**TOM WRIGHT:** Sure, sure. Sure, that’s a great question because institutions matter and institutional structure matters. What are the revenues? What is the decision making? How you prioritize things is going to shape whether or not you build a Gateway Project, or just fill potholes on streets kind of thing. And we’ve looked at our other examples in our peers around the world.

London is the city that New York looks to the most. Most people don’t understand that the Greater London Authority, I mean, the kind of modern London is only a 22-year-old invention. It was in 2000 that they created this new structure with the Mayor of London and Transport for London. They did congestion pricing, and they started to kind of really take off after that.

So, we’ve looked at those kinds of models and thought, you know, what should we be doing with our port authority, our MTA? How does the city, and the state and the states work together, and to try and put some better practices. And there’s definitely things we could learn from other peer cities.

But one thing that I’ve learned, so when I started at RPA, I actually started as an intern here while I was in grad school 25 years ago. And when I started at RPA, I thought our job ought to be to put ourselves out of business. If we can just get the governors, and the mayor, and the big agencies and authorities to do what we’re recommending, then we can go home.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Easy. (Laughter.)

**TOM WRIGHT:** Easy. And by the way, I think that’s what they thought in 1922, too.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Sure they did, yeah.

**TOM WRIGHT:** They thought, oh, we’ll just, you know, we’ll write this report. We’ll hand it off to the governor. And, you know –

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** It’s done. (Laughter.)

**TOM WRIGHT:** And it’s done. And what I’ve learned over time is there has to be this civic institutional structure, too. And New York is blessed with not just RPA, but all of the wonderful civic groups that we partner with them, environmental organizations, transit advocates, community development, historic preservation. It’s on and on and on. You have to have that other side of the coin that we don’t implement anything. I’m not going to sign a contract to build the Gateway Project. But we put pressure on, and we work with the public sector to make sure that they’re making decision making and moving in that right direction.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Right. And that stresses the importance in many ways of civil society and nonprofit, you know, engagement, and those – the points of view that are part of – a very important part of the ecosystem in any city.

**TOM WRIGHT:** Absolutely.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** And often, you know, when we’re at the table with government, industry, academia, nonprofits are at the table, of course, residents, good things happen.

**TOM WRIGHT:** Yep.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** It’s challenging. We know that, and that’s – the process can be tricky. That’s what it takes.

**TOM WRIGHT:** That’s right. Can I jump in, though, that often, that kind of engagement is focused at the local level. And that’s where it’s kind of grown up from, in many ways, because people really care about what’s happening outside their – their front door. When you’re thinking about the Metropolitan scale, you’re talking about issues, again, nothing’s going to get done in four years. It requires thinking across political boundaries.

There are 782 towns and cities in the New York metropolitan region. One of them is New York City, and 781 are not. (Laughter.) And there are three states and, you know, and –and then the final thing is you also, when you’re thinking of the metropolitan scale, you’re not just looking at transportation, or just looking at community development, or just looking at landscape preservation, but you’re thinking across all of them. That really does require a civic perspective, to get outside the silos, to get outside the bureaucracy, to get outside the political process, and – and kind of figure out where you’re trying to go.

And I think that that’s a unique piece of this thing that – and my hope is that it’ll germinate from the community-based groups, but coming up to the metro scale is really important. When I was, you know, a grad student, again, kind of talking about this, there really wasn’t much understanding of the importance of or kind of agency around metropolitan planning, because we don’t do it well here in the United States.

Again, the New York metropolitan region, there is no government agency that’s thinking about this region, literally. Even at the federal level, Connecticut is up in region one with New England, and New York and New Jersey or region two with Puerto Rico. You know, even the federal government, and HUD, and DOT and EPA don’t think about this as a single region. So, that’s why a civic group is so important.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I’ll take advantage of the of the moment that we have here in the space in Vanderbilt Hall. You’ve probably read everything here. You have all the details. However, is there something that changed your thinking this time around that spoke to you differently than when you read it previously, when you see it here in person?

**TOM WRIGHT:** So look, I’ve been living and breathing this for decades, literally. And I love the history, and what I wanted to do with the show was share it with the public and bring people in and inform them about it. And we’re doing that.

But absolutely, when we, just last week when we started installing it, I’m sitting here looking like – and on one side, we’ve got a big map from 1929 that shows the proposed general plan of land uses for New York and its environs. And this is the way the planners in the ‘20s thought – this is where they thought the preserve land should be, and the parklands, and where community development should go. And all that was their vision of the region.

And if you look here, on the west side of the Hudson River in New Jersey, you see the Meadowlands, and it’s all blue, which is industrial. And they had this vision that that was the area where the industrial support for New York City would go. In fact, this map was very influential in moving the seaport from Manhattan over to New Jersey, but that’s a different – that’s in Newark Bay.

If you now look, when we did it, we go around this grand, majestic room. And on exactly the opposite side, there’s an equally large image from our 2017 regional plan of our vision of the Meadowlands. It’s all green – (laughter) – and we now think of – now the Meadowlands is crossed by the Northeast Corridor, and the New Jersey Turnpike, and it has heavy infrastructure in it. But it’s also an area in the age of climate change that floods. And it floods both upstream and downstream. It’s connected to the harbor, but it’s also got the rivers coming down.

And our vision for one of the major proposals we made in 2017, was that the Meadowlands should become the first climate park in the nation, and that the goal should be to try and, over time, take out the development and turn it into essentially a sponge to protect the communities around it, Newark and Paterson and the other urban communities that were under.

And you sit here, and it was only when we got this exhibit mounted that I thought, oh my gosh, look at this. Like, that was our vision a hundred years ago, and we have gone completely in the other direction.

The other thing I love is that we have a photograph of Robert Moses, and we talk about our tumultuous relationship with him. Most of what he built, and the highways and things is – was proposed by RPA. I hasten to add that we had also proposed transit links that never did get built. (Laughter.) So, but we were complicit in part of what he was doing, and then we had a major falling out with him over whether a bridge or a tunnel should connect Lower Manhattan.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Did you – was the Robert Moses, you know, piece here set up there for a particular reason, because Jane Jacobs is right across the hall? (Laughter.)

**TOM WRIGHT:** Well, that’s what I was going to say, yes.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Right there looking at each other. (Laughter.)

**TOM WRIGHT:** And it was – when we put it up, we said, “Oh my God, he’s glaring at Jane.”

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I know.

**TOM WRIGHT:** (Laughter.) You know, because literally across the hall is the piece with her. And so, those were kinds of things that just came about when we installed it, and what I think it does, it’s like a conversation with history to engage in this. And that’s what I want people to do, but to do it so that they will start thinking about the future, because these discussions are so important.

And – and again, this is a way of kind of – what I hope is that people will come through, walk through this, learn about the history have aha moments about oh, that’s why this is there, and I’ve always wondered, you know, why these – you know, why you can’t take a subway line between Grand Central and Penn Station, etcetera. But then I want people to make – to kind of start to look towards the future.

And we end with the fourth regional plan and asking folks, “What are your ideas?” And we’re using technology, of course, now to bring them in. And technology has changed so completely everything we do that – it’s made the civic community much stronger, because we now have access to data that it used to be only the public sector held, you know, and kept secret from us. And so it’s where – we live in a much more open and accessible society, and that’s exciting.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** And on that note, thank you, Tom, for your time, for inviting me to this beautiful gallery of a walk-through history, and sharing your insights from born and bred New Yorker and a glimpse of what the future will look like. I have no doubt that in, you know, maybe 30 years or so, there’ll be the new gallery and the images of what our city looks like. And thank you so much for your leadership and time today.

**TOM WRIGHT:** Oh, thanks, Jeremy. It’s been real fun walking through this with you.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Thank you.

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. To learn more visit at us at wwps.Microsoft.com or find me on LinkedIn and Twitter @JeremyMGoldberg.

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