

JOB TALK

'Living' wall a nice landscaping niche

Milwaukee's Kuehne Co. beautifies unique traffic barrier with landscape plants.

By Ron Hall, senior editor

■ The *Milwaukee Journal* described the unusual landscape project along I-94 as a huge "Chia Pet." That description of a "living" highway noise barrier is pretty accurate.

The job of constructing this barrier, and then of making it both green and flowering, belongs to the Kuehne Co. (formerly the Kuehne Landscape Co.), Oak Creek. The project is unique in the Midwest, although a similar noise barrier was built in New Jersey. Another in Colorado should be done next spring.

This fall, Kuehne workers built the 515-foot-long soil wall out of huge, notched, A-shaped plastic sections. Beams were placed in



Kuehne Company built this 22-foot-high traffic noise barrier using triangular-shaped frames of recycled plastic called Recy-walls by Sanders Enterprises Inc.



Each of 5,300 built-in flower boxes is hand planted: shade-loving plants on the north, an assortment of shrubs and flowering plants facing the freeway.

the notches to give the structure strength. The wall stands 22 feet tall and is 7½ feet wide at its base, tapering to 18 inches across at the top. They filled it with earth and top soil.

Then they beautified its 5,318 built-in, terraced flower boxes with more than 14,000 plants. They planted the north side, which faces a neighborhood, with shade-loving hostas. The south side along I-94 contains a striking assortment of creeping evergreens, small deciduous shrubs, prairie plants, groundcovers and wildflowers.

Kuehne will maintain the plants for the next two years, replacing those that die. The company, whose main offices are nearby, will water the plants from water tank trucks. After two years, the plants—a vegetative support for the wall—are on their own.

How do you bid such a job?

"You estimate your labor," Kuehne President Charles Johanneck tells *LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT*. "You know what the price of your materials are. That's a given. Then you take an educated guess, based on past experiences on others jobs, and you figure it from there."

Johanneck started with the Kuehne Co. in 1968. He and two other veteran employees, Andy Nalewajko and Charles "Chuck" Wolter, bought the company in 1992. Actually, it was known as the Kuehne Landscape Co. then. "We took the word 'landscape' out. It didn't accurately describe all that we do any more," he says.

The company does a lot of work for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, but it takes on other large jobs too. It's built several soccer fields and, more recently, several outdoor volleyball courts too.

"You have to be ready to accept new ideas, otherwise you're left by the wayside," says Johanneck. "It's hardly ever dull around here because you never know what you're going to be involved with next."