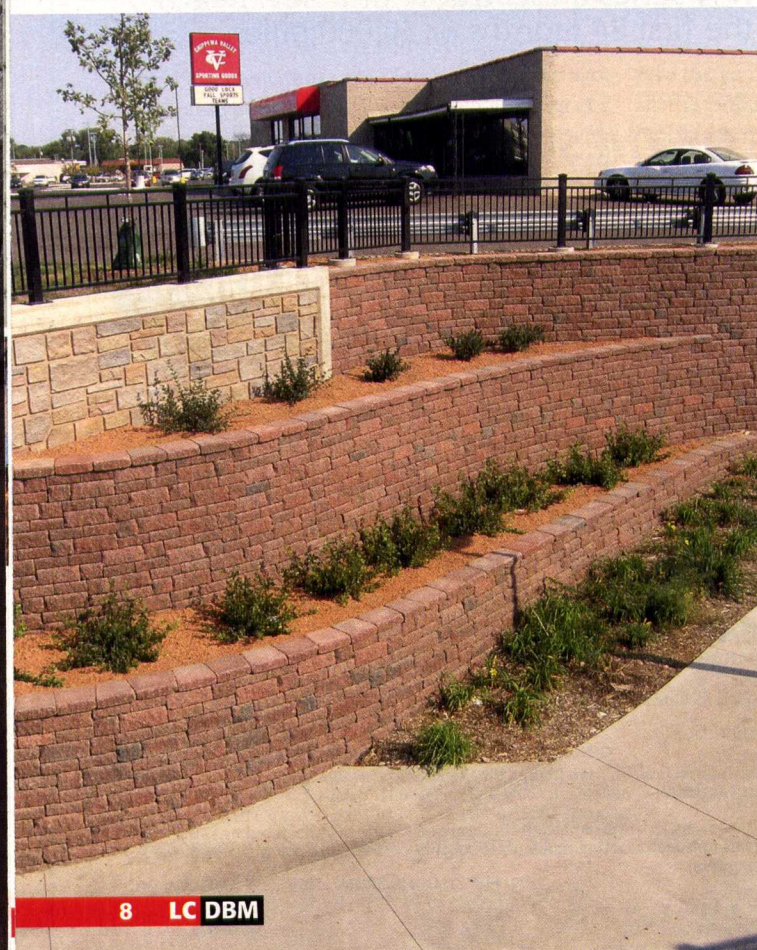




# An *Overachieving* Underpass



Eau Claire, a town of 66,500 in west central Wisconsin, often ranks high on quality of life lists. In 2013, the *Wall Street Journal's* Money Watch designated the city as one of the best places to retire in the United States. The town's quality of life comes in part from Eau Claire's strong pedestrian and bike plan, recognized in 2012 by the American Planning Association with the Wisconsin Northwest District Recognition Award.

In 2009, the Eau Claire city council approved an \$8.34 million project to return the old highway that runs through town to its former life as a landscaped boulevard that was bicycle and pedestrian friendly.

U.S. Highway 53 ran through the city and connected with neighboring Altoona, and had become dangerous over the years. Called Hastings Way after its 1916 configuration, the artery was returned to the city by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation when a new U.S. Highway 53 bypass was constructed in 2007.

"It was an older commercial area with strip malls, geared toward autos, and was very unsafe for pedestrians, as it became a central hub for the east hill neighborhood," said Douglas Derks, deputy city engineer.

The Chippewa Falls, Wis., office of engineering firm SEH Inc., held a series of public meetings to present design options, including roundabouts,

**Top:** Completed in fall 2012, the Fenwick underpass in Eau Claire, Wis., provides a safe crossing for pedestrians and cyclists in a high traffic area. Tiered segmental retaining walls with plantings make the entrances inviting for passersby and match hardscapes at the adjacent streets and shops.

**Left:** Multi-level walls provided a visual contrast to the six-foot-high retaining wall at street level. Trees, plants and shrubs planted within the tiers create an interesting, inviting entrance and mitigate stormwater overflow, assisting with runoff handled by the municipal storm system that runs beneath the underpass.



**Top:** The wall system uses two Accent units, one Cobble unit, and one Standard unit, combining about 4,200 wall panels into 6,800 square feet of four-unit panels that create a random face pattern. The wall units have low absorption and require little maintenance.

**Left:** “Design flexibility in this project was important, since the product can do step-ups and step-downs in 10-inch, 6-inch and 4-inch increments,” said Jason Rexine, manager of Versa-Lok contractor sales in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. “With the school and residential areas surrounding it, the underpass and its inviting entrance is a great solution for this redesigned urban street.”

over/underpasses and other proposed solutions. Ultimately, the plan maximized safety for walkers and wheelers, and included plans for two underpasses at the busiest intersections.

“The project really recalls the days before [U.S. 53] became a highway,” said Derks. “We wanted to return to when it was an urban street, with sidewalks, trails, landscaping and trees, and completely change the look of the corridor. Over the years there were numerous accidents, and we knew that a safer design could be put in place.”

The Hastings Way redesign included two additional underpasses, at Tamarack Street and Fenwick Street. The Tamarack underpass was completed in the project’s early stages, but the Fenwick underpass, at the corner of a school, day care center, senior apartments and a grocery store, met financial challenges and failed to pass two separate votes by the city council.

After the second failed vote, *Eau Claire Leader Telegram* editor Don Huebner wrote in an op-ed piece that despite the votes, future underpasses should not be tabled. The funding ultimately came from a local church that owned the daycare center and grocery store, and the Fenwick underpass was passed after a third vote.

Since its completion in fall 2012, the Fenwick underpass has provided a safe crossing for pedestrians and cyclists. With an underpass at such a high traffic area, the engineer and landscape architect tackled a visual problem: How could the entrances be inviting for pedestrians so they wouldn’t feel like they were going underground?

The solution was in tiered segmental retaining walls, which were chosen to match hardscapes previously installed at the Shops at Oakwood mall and a planter wall along Hastings Way. Those earlier projects used Versa-Lok’s Weathered Mosaic wall system in the Rose Creek Blend color.

“The design of tiered, planted walls gives the underpass entrance a welcoming, visual appeal from street level to below ground,” said Gary Hansen, of Hansen Land Construction of Eau Claire, whose company completed the turf restoration, tree planting, finished landscaping and hardscapes for the street redesign. 