



# I-94 Modernization Project E-Update

March/April 2021

Welcome to the I-94 e-Update!  
Here are the latest happenings on the project.



Here's what the Frontenac Street bridge southern abutment wall looked like during its rebuilding. (Photo Description: A concrete wall, called an abutment, is being built. The wall is engraved with a swirling star pattern. Orange construction ladders reach from the ground to the top of the wall.)

## Advanced Bridges: What's New?

The Milwaukee Avenue bridge over I-75 was recently finished and opened to traffic!

The East Grand Boulevard and Mt. Elliott Street bridges over I-94 both have opened one lane in each direction. Crews will be finishing work on the bridges and the surrounding roads through April.

At the Second Avenue bridge, there is utilities work being done on nearby storm sewers. Major bridge work will take place in late April or early May.

At the Frontenac Street, Burns Street, and Cadillac Avenue bridges over I-94, work crews are in three different stages of completion on the southern abutment walls. (Remember, abutment walls are the supporting structures at the ends of a bridge. One is pictured on the first page.)

At Frontenac Street, the abutment wall is complete and underground electrical work to install freeway lighting is ongoing. After the lighting work is done, widening of the shoulders will continue on both sides of I-94.

At Burns Street, crews are forming the southern abutment wall and will pour concrete at the beginning of April.

At Cadillac Avenue, workers are placing steel piling for the footing (or foundation) of the abutment walls. Widening of the shoulder is ongoing there.

**For questions or concerns during bridge work,  
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## **SBE Spotlight**

One of MDOT's goals for the I-94 project is to create roles for small and minority-owned businesses through the Small Business Enterprise (SBE) program. The SBE program is a mentoring environment for small and minority-owned businesses providing small businesses the unique opportunity to work alongside the main contractor on the project. It prepares them to meet experience and financial requirements and grow their technical capabilities for working on future Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) projects.

In this and future newsletters, we will meet SBE program participants, learn about their work, and showcase their experiences in the program.

This month, we met with Jon Kolbasa, founder of Value Engineering and a member of the program since 2016. Value Engineering has offices in Lansing and Detroit.

Kolbasa is originally from Metro Detroit and graduated from Farmington High School and Michigan State University. He's been in the transportation industry for 17 years. He started in Michigan working for MDOT then started traveling around the country, working on mega projects as a mobile project manager. After five years in each role, he moved back to Michigan and started up Value Engineering.



**Jon Kolbasa, founder of Value Engineering (Photo Description: A headshot of a man with tan skin with short dark hair, a short beard and glasses. He wears a dark sports coat and a light-colored checked shirt. There are conceptual drawings of neighborhood entries on the wall behind him.)**

**I-94 Team: What made you want to open your own firm?**

**Jon Kolbasa:** So, it was always a goal and a vision of mine all the way back to when I was in college. I felt like it would give me the best chance to have autonomy and the most ability to shape where things go as far as my professional career and [being] able to have an influence on the industry and others that I work with.

**I-94 Team: So how did you get started?**

**Jon Kolbasa:** I came back to Lansing, Michigan, in a moving truck late one Sunday night, slept on the floor the first night before we really had furniture set up. And then, on Monday morning, I pulled out a card table and chair out of the moving truck, set that up, and started working. The first week was working on business card options, buying a laptop, buying a phone, registering the business (the basics).

Early months included cold calling of people in the industry, going to conferences and industry events to get to know people and for them to get familiar with me. [I wanted] a chance to work on a project, a decent-sized project for [a] longer schedule without a pre-qualification.

It took a lot of time to get it to the point where we were getting traction, but the I-94 Detroit project was really what I was waiting for.

I remember I was at an industry event. I don't know exactly which one, but there was a presentation made and the person that was making it, I happened to know. So, I stopped him in the hallway. He said, you really need to get to know... the MDOT [I-94 project manager, Terry Stepanski]. So, I met him as soon as I could, and he told me about an industry event specifically for the SBE program.

I was determined once I heard about the program that I would do what I needed to make sure that we could be a part of it.

**I-94 Team: What did you gain by joining the SBE program?**

**Jon Kolbasa:** I was able to hire my first full-time employee, one month later I was able to hire the second full-time employee and they're still with me today.

I really looked at the program as a building block for the future; as kind of a steppingstone to learn a lot and gain a lot of experience, but also to be able to work towards pre-qualifications and building a team and building a real company.

**I-94 Team: What is pre-qualification and why was it so important for your firm to become pre-qualified?**

**Jon Kolbasa:** It's the certifications that you need to do work on MDOT projects. [You demonstrate] that your finances are set up in a transparent way for MDOT, and that they're structured according to the federal regulations.

**I-94 Team: What project have you worked on? And what was your role?**

**Jon Kolbasa:** I did design work on the roads leading up to the Concord Street and Burns Avenue bridges. And I did construction engineering on the Gratiot Avenue and Chene Street bridges.

**I-94 Team: What is construction engineering?**

**Jon Kolbasa:** Sure. Construction engineering is supporting MDOT, or the road owner, representing them with the contractor to make sure that the project is built as the plans show, the specifications require... and on budget.

**I-94 Team: How has COVID-19 had an impact on your firm?**

**Jon Kolbasa:** That's a good question. We don't do as much in-office work in Lansing. In Detroit we don't do anything in an office now. Pre-COVID, and probably post-COVID, I split my time pretty evenly between Detroit and Lansing. It used to be easy just to plan to grab breakfast, lunch or dinner with somebody. Now, you have to be more deliberate about reaching out and set up meetings and spending that time with people. So that's probably been the biggest impact, maintaining those relationships and continuing to build new relationships remotely.

**I-94 Team: What's next for your firm?**

**Jon Kolbasa:** We're working aggressively to try to get new pre-qualifications. We're starting to do work in new categories that we feel fit well with our company. We're also trying to work in one or two other what I call sub-markets, which are agencies other than MDOT, so we have a few cities and counties and agencies that we're looking at to consider for that. And we'll probably pick one or two of those and really focus on those and try to just diversify a little.

**I-94 Team: One last question, Jon. What do you find most satisfying about your work?**

**Jon Kolbasa:** In civil engineering, when you finish your design or finish working on a construction project, you get to see a big difference. You know, when you finish your design and you get to see big equipment putting it together, building what you worked on. And if you're working in construction, you start with something that's either rough or an open field, and in the end, you see a nice new rebuilt or resurfaced road. That makes a big difference. So that was something that I felt like I would have a chance to do early on – be a part of something big.



**Members of the Value Engineering team inspect the Chene Street bridge during its rebuilding in 2018. (Photo Description: A work site scene. Two people in safety vests and helmets stand in a scissor lift underneath the metal frame of a bridge deck. Another person in safety gear watches from the ground. A fourth person in safety gear is in the background in a scissor lift doing work on the bridge.)**

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