

# Nation's shortest covered bridge to be built in Geneva, Ohio

Published: Wednesday, September 29, 2010, 12:00 PM

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Students from the Ashtabula County Joint Vocational School will build the shortest covered bridge in the country in Geneva.

GENEVA, Ohio -- The county with the nation's longest covered bridge will soon have the shortest.

Ashtabula County Joint Vocational School students have spent the last two years building the 18-foot-long "Liberty Bridge."

It was designed by John Smolen, retired Ashtabula County engineer and founder of Smolen Engineering Ltd.

Smolen also designed the 613-foot Smolen-Gulf Bridge, the longest covered bridge in the country, which opened in 2008 over the Ashtabula River on State Road in Plymouth and Ashtabula townships.

Ashtabula County has 17 covered bridges that draw tourists from across the country.

The idea for the smallest bridge has always been popular, but became a reality when a concrete culvert under West Liberty Street in downtown Geneva needed repairs, said Kevin Grippi, client adviser for Smolen Engineering.

"It was in deplorable condition," he said. "So I suggested, 'Why not replace it with a covered bridge?' "

The cost of the bridge, \$400,000, is the same as the cost for reconstructing the culvert, Grippi added.

The bridge will have a tollbooth similar to covered bridges during pioneer days, but the bridge has a post and truss design unlike any covered bridges in the county.



SMLA rendering of the finished bridge by Smolen Engineering Ltd.

The locally grown red oak, poplar and maple wood was donated, and Smolen sought help from the vocational school to save money.

About 60 students in the carpentry, precision machining, welding and buildings and grounds programs have been constructing the bridge since last school year, said Principal Jon Whipple.

Cody Stroeter, a 16-year-old junior carpentry student, said he has learned teamwork and how to read blueprints and build the floor of the bridge.

"It's pretty exciting," he said. "The bridge is going to be there a long time."

Although the bridge won't be ready for this year's Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival Oct. 9 and 10, it will draw a crowd next year, said Betty Morrison, executive director for the festival. She said the festival typically draws 2,000 to 5,000 visitors.

For Geneva, the bridge is part of an effort to revitalize the city.

It is installing new street lights on Ohio 534, moving a Civil War monument to near the center of the city, building a welcome arch and rehabilitating city streets, said City Manager Jim Pearson.

The bridge will also bring tourists. It will supplant a 19-foot, 3-inch-long bridge in Elkrun Township in Columbiana County as the shortest covered bridge in the United States.

"Every charter bus that drives by will want to have a picture straddling the bridge," Pearson said.

The students plan to erect the Liberty Bridge next week.