

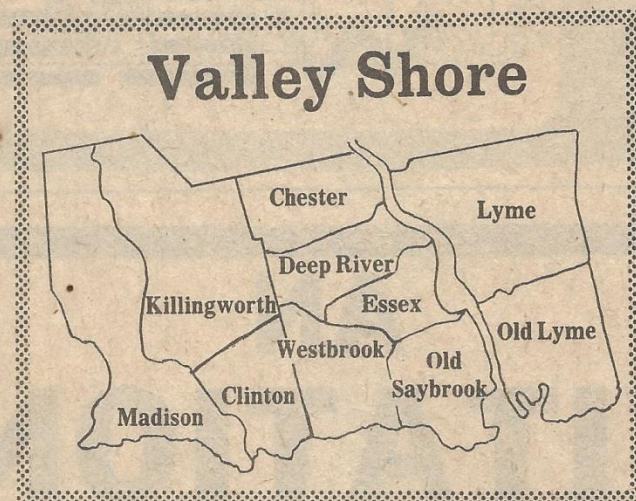
# Raft Race Draws Criticism From Riggio, Shop Owners

ESSEX — First Selectman Richard Riggio has told the Coast Guard he objects to the annual raft race, which he said is not only a nuisance and inconvenient to the town but is also dangerous.

Riggio told selectmen Wednesday night he will register the same objections with the state Department of Environmental Protection, which gave the raft committee permission again this year to finish the race at state-controlled Knott Island across the harbor from Essex Village.

He told the board that officials of the Coast Guard, which also sanctioned the race this year, told him they would "look further into the situation."

This will be the fifth year for the race which has grown into a major shoreline event, much to the anger of Essex shop owners and village residents. They objected last year to noise, drunkenness and confusion that they said accompanied the event.



Shop owners were angry about spectators cars, which took up available parking spaces. They said the traffic drove away potential customers on a normally busy summer Saturday.

The raft committee agreed this year not to provide a launch service from the foot of Main Street to Knott Island where after-race activities take place.

The organizers said the change should eliminate last year's problems.

But Riggio was not mollified. He said, after the objections of residents and store owners last year, he didn't want the race in Essex again.

He said the committee can't control the crowd of thousands and was "just lucky last year there were

no serious injuries on land or in the water."

"It's not just the automobiles but the drunken bodies around. Essex cannot handle an event like this," Riggio said.

He said he felt the crowd would still gather despite the lack of a launch and that the parking problems will even be worse this year because Steamboat Dock's parking lot won't be available because it is being transformed into a park.

The fire department also was upset last year because the firemen feared they couldn't get emergency vehicles down Main Street and onto side streets, Riggio said.

"I know we can't do anything about prohibiting the race but we can at least tell the Coast Guard and DEP we don't support it," Riggio said.

The race is scheduled this year for Aug. 4 and 200 rafts are expected, organizers said.