

3/80 COURANT

Essex Gears Up and Battens

By CLAUDIA VAN NES

ESSEX — The boisterous, popular and controversial Connecticut River Raft Race will be held again this summer for the sixth consecutive year and will be more fun and orderly than ever before Kenneth Fischburg, one of the race organizers, said Tuesday.

Fischburg and the race committee are in the middle of organizing the event, scheduled for July 26, which, last

year, pitted 100 homemade rafts against each other as their owners and crews propelled them by various ingenious means from the Deep River town dock to Nott Island across the harbor from Essex.

The race began six years ago when a handful of friends hastily threw together several floating contraptions and raced each for six miles to the island.

But by 1978 the race had grown and it attracted thousands of spectators on

land and in private boats, which wove in and out among the rafts, often creating a dangerous condition according, Essex town officials said.

Store owners and residents along lower Main Street in Essex had protested the race because of the litter in town and because, in 1978, that part of the street was blocked off to traffic preventing people from shopping on what is normally a lucrative mid-summer Saturday. Last year, 15 constables were

Down for Sixth Annual Raft Race

hired to control traffic and people.

First Selectman Richard Riggio, after the complaints two years ago, tried to stop the race last spring, saying the town was not prepared for the onslaught of fans and participants. But permission to proceed was granted to the Race Committee by the state Department of Environmental Protection and the U.S. Coast Guard. The committee hasn't secured permission from these agencies yet for this year's race.

Deep River officials have favored the race and Nott Island is owned by the state, so there was little the town could do other than beef up its constable patrols and pray for bad weather on the day of the 1979 race.

A heavy downpour did occur and Riggio attributed the more orderly race to the weather. But the organizers also had eliminated a shuttle service from the town dock to the island which cut down on the number of spectators in

town.

Fischburg blamed the rain for the relatively meager amount raised by the committee in 1979 — several hundred dollars compared with about \$3,500 the preceding year — earmarked for local charities. Much of the raised the year before was from the beer and food concessionaires, who gave a portion of their profits to the committee, which in turn donated the funds to charity. Other contributions come from the entry fees.