

Coast Guard Set to Approve Raft Race

By TED FUNSTEN

After encountering some obstacles, the Connecticut River Raft Race seems near successfully completing a long course of applications.

Despite recommendations by the area Coast Guard station to the contrary and opposition by state public safety officials, race organizers are expected to win Coast Guard approval for an August 1 race from Middletown to Haddam. The race has already won state Department of Environmental Protection approval.

The branch chief for boating affairs at the Coast Guard's district office on Governor's Island, New York, said this week that he fully expected the race to win approval, though with strict provisions against safety violations.

State police officials reluctantly said they would again send three boats to patrol the race, which one officer called unmanageable and hazardous. "It's just a matter of time before someone gets killed," said Lt. Bob O'Shaughnessy of the department's emergency services division.

Area Coast Guard officials had expressed concern over the diversion of boats to patrol the race, but Lt. j.g. Jay Corey anticipated the service would be able to provide the same coverage it had last year, when two Coast Guard patrol boats and six Guard auxiliary boats, cruised the race course between Deep River and Essex.

But in future years, the Coast Guard will decrease its coverage so that "the burden of the race will eventually rest on the sponsor's shoulders," Corey said.

Coast Guard officials are still working out the exact number of boats to patrol the race, Corey said.

The service has only six patrol boats covering Long Island Sound, and the distance up-river would delay the response by boats patrolling the race to emergencies in the Sound, Coast Guard officials said.

Three state police department boats also patrolled the race last year.

Along with concerns over the diversion of boats to patrol the race, officials at the New Haven Coast Guard station had voiced trepidation about safety problems at past races.

"It's our feeling here that definitely the race was bad news in the past,"

(Continued on Page 5)

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(Continued from Page 1)

Corey said. He said the permit, if issued, would require compliance with safety regulations. Any violation of rules banning overloading rafts or wearing life preservers would reduce chances that the race would win approval in future years, he said.

Officials and race organizers were able to work out solutions to the safety concerns in numerous discussions, since the organizers applied early for a permit, he said.

The race was moved up-river from Essex because of traffic and safety problems at the finish line in Essex.

Organizers plan to start the race in the river off Harborpark, in Middletown, and finish the race off Haddam Meadows State Park in Haddam, where post-race festivities would be held.

Organizers are to provide \$500,000 liability insurance, hire eight security guards, take responsibility for sanitary facilities at the state park, and follow several other provisions to meet the requirements of the DEP permit for the park's use.

O'Shaughnessy, who called the race "an excuse for a large party," said the affair put "an extreme burden on the state." State police patrol boats, along with troopers from H, K, and F Troops and boats from the state DEP will be covering the race.

Patrols at past races encountered numerous accidents among spectator boats and rafts, assaults, disturbances, alleged rapes, people falling into the river, and foot injuries, he said. A constable was reported assaulted with an oar at last year's race, he said.

"It's unmanageable. It's not that we're opposed to people having fun. But this is ridiculous," he lamented.

Festivities at the Haddam Meadows state park will be easier to control, since the park is more accessible than Knott's Island off Essex, where previous races ended, he said.

But different problems are expected to appear. The race course is longer this year, and more rafts may fail to finish, he said.

Proceeds from the race are donated to children's charities.

But O'Shaughnessy said that considering the cost of the race, organizers would do better to find another way to raise money.

Race Committee Chairman Ken Fischburg said he had received 100 preliminary inquiries about the race, but that questions over its approval had discouraged some people from entering.

He said he was receiving entry forms at his 3 Meadow Lane address in Norwich.

Last year's winners, from the Nor-elco Corporation plant in Essex, are confident of winning again this year, Fischburg said.