

COURANT

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A safe raft race

OUR TOWNS

Haddam & Neighbors

Whimsy and fun may run aground on the shoals of regulation unless the state and organizers of the Connecticut River Raft Race come to terms over this year's event.

The organizers' desire to improve the event, which might then draw a larger crowd, needs to be balanced against the worries of the Department of Environmental Protection about safety.

The Aug. 6 race begins at Hurd State Park in East Hampton and finishes at Haddam Meadows State Park about four miles downstream. Last year, a crowd of 1,500 to 2,000 waited on shore in Haddam to see the homemade rafts arrive and to listen to bands. The DEP reported 21 arrests. Most involved the alleged illegal use of drugs or alcohol.

This year, the organizers wanted to make

more of a splash for the 20th annual race. They arranged for a radio station to promote the event and do live broadcasts from Haddam Meadows during the race. The station's participation caused DEP security officials to worry that the crowd would grow too big for their officers to control.

The state has suggested an alcohol-free fenced area where bands would perform. Drinking would be allowed outside that compound and on boats on the water. Extending the ban to the entire park would make enforcement more difficult.

The state's concern that the event is becoming a shore-based party is warranted. In their promotions and at the race, the event's organizers should take the lead and discourage drinking and rowdiness.

It would take only one bad year to sink an event that many people in the region look forward to.