
Soap box derby board considers move Brewer traffic concerns prompt search for Bangor, Old Town race sites; [All Edition]

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BREWER - For nearly a decade, Eastern Maine Soap Box Derby Inc. has called Brewer its home, but safety concerns have created a traffic jam for organizers and, as a result, the race may be moved.

The organization's board of directors will meet Saturday to discuss the future of the Brewer site and other possible options.

"The intention is to decide" Saturday where the June 2005 races will be held, member John Hannington said Monday.

The group, which has held its Soap Box Derby on State Street in Brewer since 1996, is scrambling against time because deadlines for advertising are looming.

The Soap Box Derby is for boys and girls age 8 to 18 who compete in races with cars they build from a kit, typically with their parents or grandparents.

The Brewer race is one of four held in the state, with the others in Houlton, Camden and Rumford.

Last year, 70 youth and six special-needs racers from all over Eastern Maine converged on Brewer for the race. In years past, up to 130 racers have participated.

Members have been talking about locations with parks and recreation personnel in Brewer, Bangor and Old Town.

"We have had very positive response from all three cities in finding a suitable site for next year's race," Eastern Maine Soap Box Derby President David Vroom said in a press release.

The problem in Brewer centers on closing State Street to traffic on Friday night to set up for the event, which in years past has created traffic safety issues.

"We've beat our heads against the wall to find an answer [to stay in Brewer] and have come up empty," Hannington said.

Last year, the races were split over two weekends to address the traffic problems, but that caused other concerns for the organization.

"We had no traffic issues last year, but it did create a lot of work for the Soap Box Derby workers," Ken Hanscom, Brewer Parks and Recreation director, said Monday.

"[Splitting the event] just doesn't work for us," Hannington said. "It was difficult at best."

Buck Street in Bangor and Stillwater Avenue, next to Old Town High School, are the primary alternate locations under consideration. There is no specific street angle required for the race site, but maintaining a safe speed is key.

In Brewer, 900 feet of roadway is used, and racers reach speeds of between 23 and 24 mph, said derby treasurer Vicki Vroom on Monday.

"What we strive for is a nice long run for the kids," she said.

The pending racino, located at Bass Park, is a drawback to Bangor's location, because additional traffic in the area could cause a problem, Vroom said. The organization is looking to negotiate a site for the next three years. She added there are several backup locations in Bangor "that could work for us."

"We are looking for a host city that will partner with the Eastern Maine Soap Box Derby to put on a quality event for the youth, for years to come," Hannington said.

There is one option that would keep the races in Brewer, Hanscom said.

"There is a possibility of a Saturday-Sunday type of deal where Saturday would be set aside for the trial runs," he said.

All three cities are waiting to see what the derby board decides.

"We want whatever works out well with Eastern Maine Soap Box Derby," Hanscom said. "We'll be understanding."

Registration for the 2005 race will begin Jan. 22.

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