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ALLSTON BRIGHTON

Officials to explore reuse, preservation of Charles River Speedway headquarters

Posted by Matt Rocheleau February 3, 2012 09:57 AM

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(Courtesy of Boston Public Library)

For much of the early half of the 20th century, the Charles River Speedway was a center of harness racing and high society.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

A study is underway to explore possible reuse and preservation options for the

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Charles River Speedway headquarters, once the center of operations of a long-vanished race track for horse-drawn buggies.

Leading the feasibility study are Historic Boston, Inc., a nonprofit that works to redevelop historically-significant buildings, and the state Department of Conservation and Recreation, which owns the property and calls it, "one of the agency's most historically significant structures."

(To see photos of the former Charles River Speedway complex, [click here](#).)

Built in 1899, the sprawling speedway complex included a two-mile bicycle path, pedestrian promenade, an oval racetrack designed for sulky, or harness, racing, and a 1.75-mile parkway loop for carriages along the Charles River, the [Globe reported two summers ago](#).

Designed by prominent local architect William D. Austin, the headquarters buildings included the residence of its superintendent, administrative offices, stables, and a parks police station.

The study will guide the state department's future decision-making about what to do to possibly reuse or preserve the 113-year-old speedway headquarters. The report, expected to be completed by March, will include an updated conditions assessment, marketing analysis, preparation of cost estimates, and conceptual renderings for redevelopment options, the state's Department of Conservation and Recreation said in a press release.

At a meeting on Feb. 27, officials from the state and the partnering nonprofit will present a draft feasibility report to obtain public input. The meeting will be held at the Honan-Allston Branch Library's auditorium from 6 to 7:30 p.m.

Preliminary talks about reuse options began last spring when a public design discussion was hosted by the Boston Preservation Alliance, which nominated the speedway headquarters to advocacy group Preservation Massachusetts' catalog of the "Most Endangered Historic Resources" in the state.

The property was named to that annual list in Sept. 2010.

State lawmakers had passed legislation that would allow the buildings to be renovated so a nearby State Police barracks could move there, but the idea proved too costly, the [Globe reported two summers ago](#).

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And, "The building needs a whole lot more," than the \$132,000 the state had agreed to invest in repairs to stop the buildings' decay, Joseph Orfant of state Department of Recreation and Conservation told the [Globe](#) in summer 2010. "It's very historic, it's very important to us, but it's a building that needs to find a new use. It needs to find a guardian angel."

In July 2010, the site was added to the National Register of Historic Places, an honor that recognizes the local significance but offers virtually no protection.

A petition to make it a city landmark has been pending since 2002. Following a public hearing last May, the city's landmarks commission has put a vote to potentially designate the speedway's former headquarters a landmark at the request of the conservation department so the state agency can complete its feasibility study first.

Questions about the public meeting scheduled for Feb. 27 can be directed to DCR.Updates@state.ma.us or by calling 617-626-4974.

To see photos of the former Charles River Speedway complex, [click here](#).

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