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## State to solicit bids for historic curatorship of Charles River Speedway site

Posted by Matt Rocheleau March 6, 2012 04:38 PM

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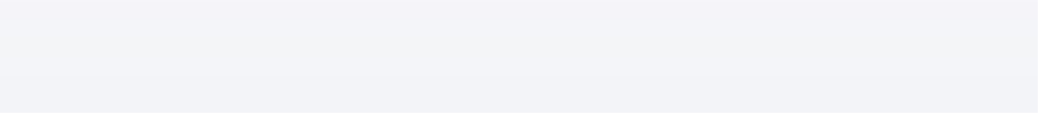
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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

A state-commissioned study has concluded that the most likely path to preserving the publicly-owned Charles River Speedway headquarters site is through historic curatorship.

One of the oldest properties owned and managed by the state Department of Conservation and Recreation, it was once the center of operations of a long-vanished race track for horse-drawn buggies.

Last week, officials unveiled the findings of a feasibility study that explored possible reuse and preservation options for the decaying, 113-year-old speedway headquarters.

The study, which can be read in its entirety [here](#), says that private redevelopment – projected to cost between \$2.6 million and \$2.7 million – is unlikely.

This spring, after more details are worked out, the state plans to launch a formal, six- to nine-month competitive bid process to seek out potential historic curators, Department of Conservation and Recreation Commissioner Edward M. Lambert, Jr said in a recent phone interview.

“Overall, I think we’re happy with the report,” he said. “It’s really not plausible to just have the [private] market determine the sustainability of that property.”

Through the conservation and recreation department’s curatorship program, the state partners with a curator who agrees to rehabilitate, manage and maintain a historic property in return for a long-term lease.

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 near where the Brighton neighborhood of Boston and Watertown meet, 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.

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

Before soliciting historic curatorship proposals, the state hopes to craft a more detailed outlook of what the site's future could encompass, including what level of public access the site would allow, the commissioner said.

"We think it's an important site for the Commonwealth's history," said Lambert, citing that the site has value both in its architecture and close location to the Charles River. "We want to make sure [efforts to preserve the property are] done appropriately."

The study was led by Historic Boston, Inc., a nonprofit that works to redevelop historically-significant buildings, and the state's conservation department, along with support from the Boston Preservation Alliance. It found the most likely options for reuse would be to use the buildings as office space, and possibly with some space used as a child care center.

"As much of this report illustrates, the Speedway is not a typical real estate project," the report's executive summary says in part. "Its reuse will require imagination and commitment to an unconventional project with important but not-typical returns. The report makes clear that the Speedway Building is a good candidate for the DCR's Historic Curatorship Program, a national model which matches parties with a creative but feasible vision with other equally 'atypical' historically-significant properties."

Preliminary talks about reuse options began last spring when a public design charrette 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 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 in Sept. 2010.

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.

To see a copy of the complete draft feasibility study report, public meeting presentation and other documents, [click here](#).

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

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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.

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