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

In a stealth race against time

Historians seek to restore glint of Brighton track

By Andrew Ryan
GLOBE STAFF

Arickety maze of boarded-up buildings stands at a teeming crossroads in Brighton, traffic rumbling past forlorn turrets and weathered wood shingles the color of mud.

Weeds sprout from the fieldstone foundation along a sidewalk on Western Avenue. Waiting there for a bus, most riders miss the arched gables and century-old stable doors of a sporting venue of yore, where the well-to-do once paraded in horse-



YOON S. BYUN/GLOBE STAFF

The shuttered buildings of the **speedway** in Brighton were built between 1899 and 1905. Today, few clues betray its past.

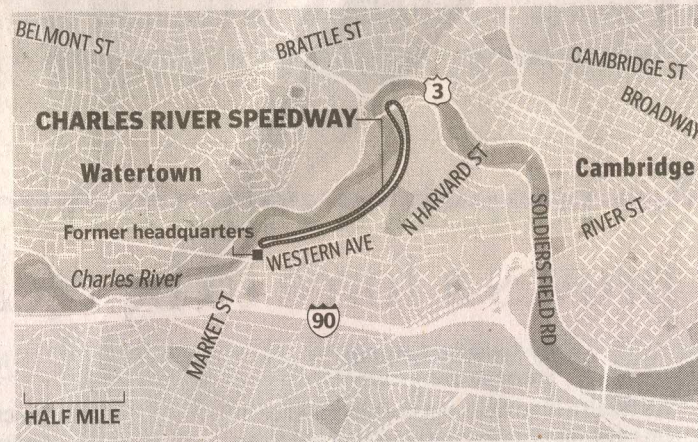
drawn buggies and thousands cheered harness racing on a famously springy track. No marker even identifies it as the headquarters of the long-ago-vanished Charles River Speedway.

Preservationists want that changed. The cluster of six ramshackle structures was named yesterday to an annual list of the "Most Endangered Historic Resources" in the state. The distinction from the advocacy group Preservation Massachusetts is designed to pressure the owner of the property, the state Department of Recreation and Conservation.

"By calling attention to the Speedway Headquarters, we hope to inspire new thinking about potential re-use scenarios for this unique building," said Sarah D. Kelly, executive director of the

SPEEDWAY, Page B15

Preservationists seek to raise stakes on vanished speedway



SOURCE: ESRI AARON ATENCIO/GLOBE STAFF



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The complex was the first project of the Metropolitan Park Commission, a precursor of the district commission.

SPEEDWAY Continued from Page B1

Boston Preservation Alliance, which nominated the structure to the list.

"The goal is to work collaboratively with state agencies, and potentially private developers, to see realistic alternatives explored."

The low, rambling buildings echo elements of a seaside estate with their wood-shingled facades, making a connection to the nearby Charles River.

The structures are the remnants of the first project of the Metropolitan Park Commission, a sprawling speedway complex laid out by the firm of famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted.

The state recently signed a \$132,000 contract for repairs slated to start this fall along Western Avenue to shore up the foundation, replace rotted sills, and reshingle exterior walls. But officials acknowledge that the work will only stop decay.

"The building needs a whole lot more," Joseph Orfant of state Department of Recreation and Conservation said of the group of buildings. "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."

State lawmakers recently

passed legislation that would clear the way for plans to renovate the buildings and move nearby State Police barracks there, but it would be too costly in the current fiscal climate, said Representative Michael J. Moran. "There's nothing I'd like to see more than to refurbish it and get it back to its original look," said Moran, a Democrat from Brighton. "But it comes down to money."

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

In July, the site was added to

the National Register of Historic Places, an honor that recognizes the local significance but offers essentially no protection. A petition to make it a city landmark has been pending since 2002.

Today, the interior courtyard is overrun with weeds, an unkempt tree, and dead leaves. The stables have become garages for two John Deere riding lawn mowers and a power boat in a trailer, the smell of oil long ago eclipsing any stench of horse manure.

Permanent red-and-white signs saying "vacant" have been bolted on the exterior of several of the structures, but one building remains in use by the state as office space for the Department of Fish and Game.

Preservationists point to the buildings' unique blend of shingle, Queen Anne, and Colonial Revival-style architectures and its role in the social fabric of the city a century ago.

ONLINE
View more photographs of the speedway at boston.com/globe.

"This is one of these hidden gems," said Charlie Vasiliades, vice president of Brighton Allston Historical Society. "I think very few people know this is the last remnant of the speedway."

Arguably, many people do not know that Brighton had a speed-

way at all. Built in 1899, the complex included a 2-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 50-foot-wide parkway followed the curve of the river through a marshy meadow, giving the gentry a serene setting to parade on pleasure rides in their horse and buggies, away from the streetcars and other chaos of city streets. In the winter, sleighs skidded across the snow. But the sulkies really drew the crowds.

"There were some significant

aces," said William P. Marchione, a local historian and author of the book "Allston-Brighton in Transition, From Cattle Town to Streetcar Suburb." "Some records were set on the speedway."

On Oct. 13, 1930, thousands of spectators watched seven hours of competition, highlighted by a new course record.

"For the harness horse folk the big thrill came from the mile in 2:05½ by Mrs. Charles F. Adams' pacer Widow Grattan," reported the next day's Boston Globe. "Mr. Grattan [was] driving."

The remaining headquarters buildings are at the western edge of the parkway loop, which has been absorbed by Soldiers Field Road and the expanding urban landscape. The structures are separate from the green space along the river, cut off by traffic.

Shaina Cooper waited for a bus on Western Avenue, her back facing the warped wood shingles on the exterior wall.

"I've always passed by this since I was a kid and I have no idea what it is," said Cooper, a 22-year-old student heading to Newbury College. "But if it's part of history, I think you should try to keep it."

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