



BRACING FOR RACING

Tour of Connecticut raises region's hopes for economic windfall

By Marrecca Fiore
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Hundreds and perhaps thousands of people will converge in Torrington and throughout Litchfield County Sunday for the start of the Tour of Connecticut cycling race.

Hopefully, they'll spend money.

That's one of the primary reasons Torrington lobbied hard for a leg of the multi-stage cycling race after witnessing its successful local debut in Waterbury last year. Despite that, many Litchfield County officials, business owners and residents said they have no special plans for the event, which debuted three years ago in Danbury as the Housatonic Classic.

That could be because this is the event's first year in Litchfield County. In Waterbury, which had a successful first year of the race last spring, people along the race

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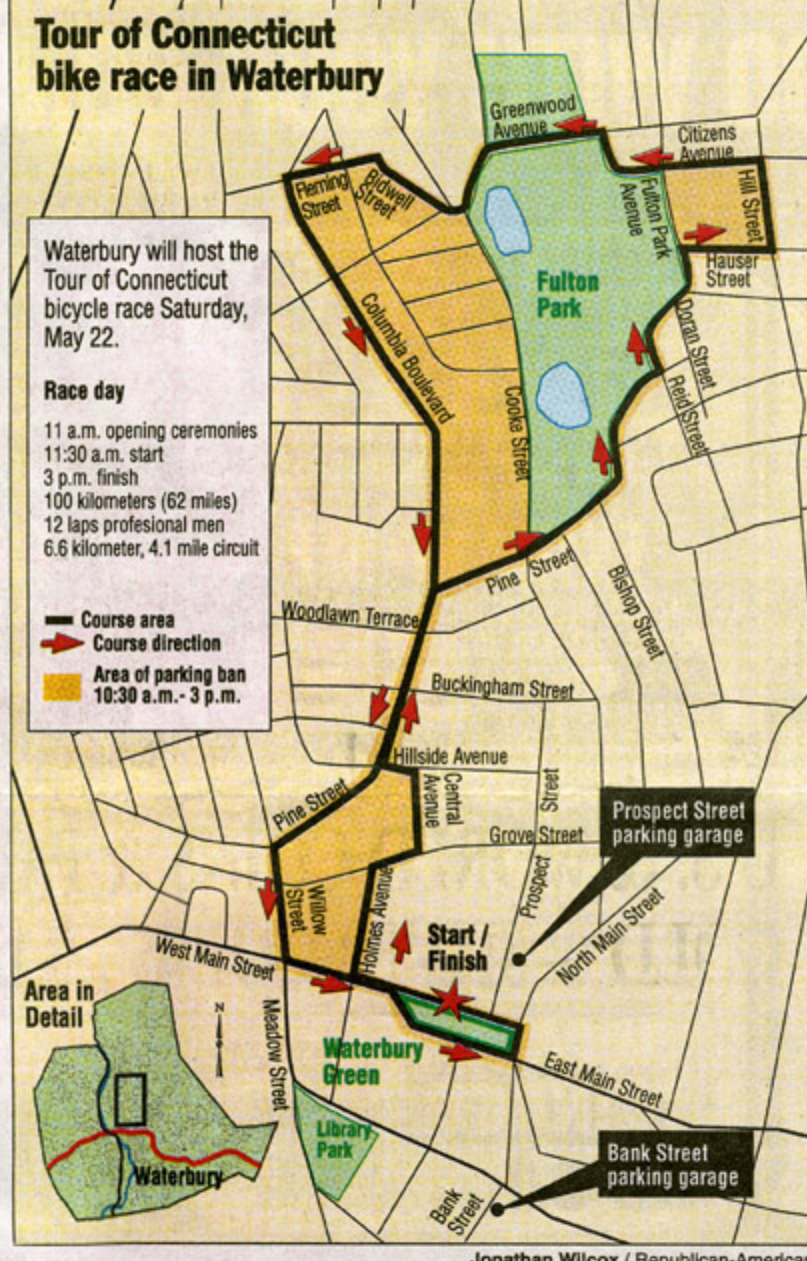
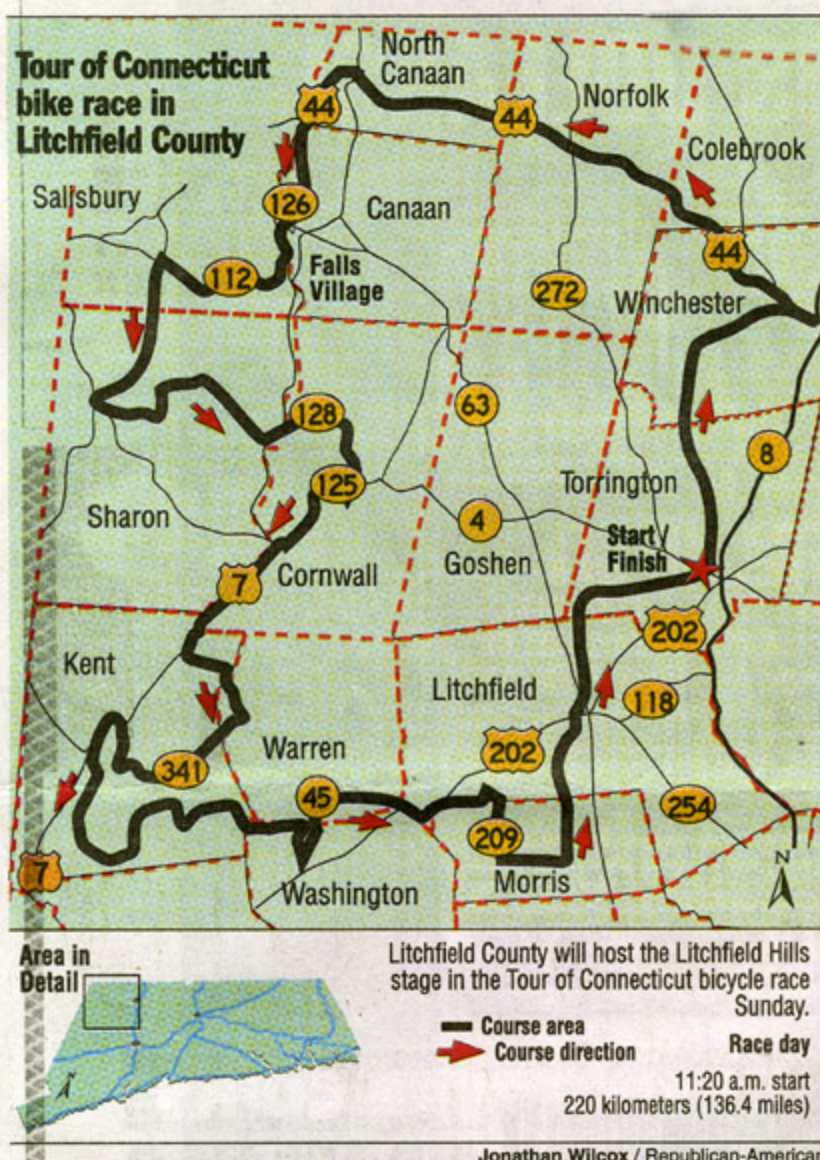
RACE STAGES

- **Stage one:** Litchfield Hills, Sunday, 137.5 miles
- **Stage two:** Lime Rock Park circuit race, May 20, 31.25 miles
- **Stage three:** New Haven criterium, May 21, 31.25 miles
- **Stage four:** Waterbury Climbers Cup, May 22, 50 miles
- **Stage five:** Housatonic Valley Classic, Danbury and around Candlewood Lake, May 23, 100 miles



Republican-American

Cyclists will be a blur along Litchfield County roads during a 137.5-mile race in the Tour of Connecticut on Sunday.



BIKE: Spotlight on Torrington Sunday

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route are sending invitations for parties that have quickly become the place to be on race day.

Still, even Waterbury officials, who praised the positive image and good times the race brought last year, were unable to come up with figures of how well the city did last year nor how well it's expected to do this year.

The Tour of Connecticut includes five separate races, including the first in Litchfield County Sunday, another at Lime Rock racetrack in Salisbury Thursday, and Waterbury's portion next Saturday. The tour will also stop in New Haven and Danbury.

With hundreds of cycling fans and curious residents and more than 200 cyclists expected to attend each leg of the race, officials are hopeful they also will spend money at local hotels, restaurants, and shops.

Janet Serra, executive director of the Northwest Connecticut Convention and Visitors Bureau, said it's hard to say just what the economic impact will be. "It's the first year, so it's kind of hard to predict," Serra said. "But we are expecting that the crowds will increase as the years continue and the race continues to grow. It is a professionally organized bike race with quite a large purse, so we're very excited about it."

Racers compete for a \$20,000 purse.

Torrington marks the start and the finish line of first leg of the tour, officially dubbed the Litchfield Hills race.

The 220K starts at 11:20 a.m. on Main Street downtown, loops around Litchfield County and finishes back in Torrington. Opening ceremonies are planned for 11 a.m.

Many Torrington hotels and motels have already started filling up.

The front desk clerk at the Days Inn on Winsted Road in Torrington said the hotel is completely full for the weekend. Even in Litchfield, where the race just passes through, the Litchfield Inn is starting to fill up quickly. It has 16 out of 32 rooms available Friday night, but just three rooms available for Saturday, the desk clerk said.

The Yankee Pedlar Inn is booked, front desk manager Rudy Goodman said. The inn's 60 rooms are full this coming weekend and about 50 percent of the guests are associated with the race. The Torrington Bed and Breakfast on Alvord Street also is full for the weekend.

"I think there are probably 20 weekends a year

we could all use more rooms," said Torrington Bed and Breakfast owner Mike Driscoll. "I am filled. One of my suites is filled with bikers ... Anytime we bring people to Litchfield County it's good for everybody, especially the downtown merchants if they're open."

Tour of Connecticut organizer John Eustice of New York City-based Sparta Cycling, said cycling events often galvanize community spirit.

"I'm encouraging people to bring their families downtown early, get a good seat, mill around and do some shopping. They should be able to go to the Yankee Pedlar and see the racers getting ready. It should be a good racing atmosphere akin to what you would see in Europe."

Owen Quinn
Torrington mayor

"I think there is an economic impact because people come to town and spend money and they stay in hotels and that will grow as we grow and develop more hospitality," he said. "But the biggest positive influence is that it stimulates a community. People know that the race is coming to them. Their home is a stadium."

In Waterbury last year, numerous block parties were held to celebrate the race.

Jim Whitney, who works out of the visitors bureau's Waterbury office, said block parties and house parties are being planned this year in Waterbury. He said the race drew thousands of spectators to the streets of Waterbury last year and is expected to attract thousands more this year.

"People really didn't understand what this was until they saw it," he said. "The interest has been significantly stronger this year. People are actually sending out invitations to (house) parties. Everyone is very serious about this. A giant festival is really what it is."

Although Whitney did not have specific figures

on the economic impact the bike race had on the city of Waterbury, he said downtown's two hotels were filled the weekend of the race and many of the rooms were occupied by race participants or spectators.

As for Litchfield County, many local officials said block parties and other celebrations were not planned for their areas, but they encouraged residents to turn out and enjoy the race.

In Kent, Sal Lilienthal, owner of The Bicycle Tour Co., said he was excited about the race.

"I used to work with John Eustice ... and I've organized a bike race for that day," he said.

Lilienthal is also a race sponsor and is donating 200 water bottles to race participants. Although, there are no parties planned for Kent that Lilienthal knows of, he said there could be some in coming years.

"It's our first time doing it, so there may be a block party next year," he said. "Each year it's going to get bigger and bigger."

Torrington Mayor Owen Quinn said residents should come downtown Sunday and join the celebration.

"I'm encouraging people to bring their families downtown early, get a good seat, mill around and do some shopping," he said. "They should be able to go to the Yankee Pedlar and see the racers getting ready. It should be a good racing atmosphere akin to what you would see in Europe."

Many downtown shops were undecided as to whether they would open on Sunday for the race.

But Charlie Marczewski, who co-owns Chiane's with Diane Persechino, said, though he's normally closed, he would open.

"We'll do lunch and everything, the full nine yards," he said.

The Yankee Pedlar Inn's restaurant will be open all day, said front desk manager Rudy Goodman.

Good thing, because Eustice said he expects a big turnout in Torrington.

"Torrington was a community that really wanted it," he said. "They have been terrific in organizing themselves." Torrington and most all of Litchfield County was chosen because of its beautiful and hilly scenery, Eustice said.

Litchfield County race festivities continue at noon Thursday with a fast, lunch-time race at Lime Rock Park in Lakeville. "People should come down, it's going to be a really good race," said Lime Rock Park public relations manager Roy Hasty.

Waterbury's race is Saturday, with opening ceremonies at 11 and the pro race starting at 12:45.