

House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) has sponsored a resolution that would allow about 60 underage, unlicensed drivers to cruise down Constitution Avenue Northwest at speeds exceeding the legal speed limit in unregistered, driver-constructed vehicles.

No, Hoyer has not lost his mind. This Saturday will mark the 65th annual running of the Greater Washington Soap Box Derby, a nostalgic small-town tradition that has been gaining popularity in the city in recent years.

“This event has been called ‘the greatest amateur racing event in the world’ and is a wonderful opportunity for our children from the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia to venture into the world of science by creating their own basic style car, while experiencing the spirit of competition,” Hoyer wrote in an e-mail. “These young people work very hard to build their own gravity powered race cars from a kit provided by the All-American Soap Box Derby Program.”

The race course travels down Constitution Avenue for 700 feet to the finish line at Louisiana Avenue Northwest, a course that takes racers about 30 seconds to traverse. Two cars race head to head, and any car that loses two races is eliminated until a winner emerges — a process that could take from 8:30 in the morning till 5:30 at night.

The race is a longtime Washington, D.C., tradition, but also one that has struggled to retain its popularity. In the 1940s, the derby was a huge summertime event: President Herbert Hoover was in charge, and the now-defunct Washington Star, which sponsored the event with General Motors, devoted coverage in its sports pages.

But big cities like Washington have had trouble keeping the event alive and vibrant, said derby director Mike Harrigan. Now, however, the derby seems to be making a comeback.

“People come up to me and say, ‘I didn’t think this existed anymore. I watched this as a kid,’” Harrigan said. Last year, the race attracted only 35 contestants, but this year race organizers expect about 60 competitors.

Harrigan said the derby has benefited from a backlash against a digital lifestyle, with many

parents now trying to get their kids outside and active.

“This gets kids away from TV and video games. This is different,” Harrigan said. “It’s not a drop off/pick up sort of sport.”

Parents have to spend weeks or months working with their children to build the cars, screwing in bolts, hammering nails and carving the wood.

“Participating in the Soap Box Derby provides contestants with an opportunity to learn basic building skills and a sense of accomplishment,” Hoyer wrote.

Washington has benefited as well from a national publicity drive led by NASCAR and Levi Strauss Signature, who were looking for an inner-city location to promote the derby.

In May, NASCAR star Jimmie Johnson came to the District to raise awareness of the event and help inner-city kids get involved. Levi Strauss Signature donated 10 cars, which were given to the Fishing School, Kid Power DC, Howard Road Academy and a Boy Scout troop.

“This organization promotes some of the same values that are important to our race team: teamwork, dedication, competition, perseverance and sportsmanship,” Johnson said in a statement. “Spending time helping this group of children build their first Soap Box Derby cars and sharing my knowledge of racing has been a rewarding experience.”

With soap box derby cars starting at about \$600, the donations were essential to opening up this year’s field, Harrigan said.

This increase in participation, especially with the low-income involvement, is especially significant given the location, which Harrigan believes is one of the best in the country.

“It’s a beautiful venue,” he said. “The parks allow people to come in and watch.”

This is the 16th year that the derby has been held on Capitol grounds. Hoyer has been responsible for the resolution every time.

“Since 1991 the Greater Washington Soap Box Derby Association has held its race on the Capitol grounds,” Hoyer wrote. “Each year it attracts over 50 racers, both boys and girls ranging in age from 8 to 17.”

Saturday’s racing will feature three age categories. The winners in each division advance to the World Championship Soap Box Derby, which is held in late July in Akron, Ohio.

Though racers from D.C. have never won at the World Championship, Harrigan points to positive trends for the area: Every year since 2001, D.C. has had a top 10 finisher, and last year, a D.C. racer even finished in second place.

Harrigan said he is hoping this year will be the year for a world champion from the District.

The racing will take place from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. June 17. Refreshments will be provided at the finish line on Louisiana Avenue, at a stand organizers have dubbed the “Downhill Grill.”