

A fiery gift from Greece arrives next week

By Michael Morton/The MetroWest Daily News
Posted Apr 09, 2008 @ 10:00 AM

HOPKINTON —

Nearly two months after organizers announced a one-year postponement of a flame coming from Greece to the town's Boston Marathon starting line, the ceremony is back on and will be held next week.

This time, organizers are tweaking the program for security concerns after the Olympic torch was recently targeted by human rights protesters in Paris. They are also trying to send a clear message: the Hopkinton flame is a gift from the mayor of Marathon, Greece, and is not connected to the torch that will be carried into this summer's Beijing games.

"It's absolutely imperative we differentiate," Hopkinton Athletic Association President Tim Kilduff said during a press conference at the police station yesterday, explaining organizers were worried about the two events being conflated. "We got a little nervous when we saw this stuff on television."

The origins of the Hopkinton flame can be traced to Marathon, Greece, and its mayor, Spyros Zagaris. Seeking to promote his hometown's inspiration for marathons – as legend has it, a warrior ran 26 miles from the Battle of Marathon to tell leaders in Athens about a major victory – Zagaris offered a gift of a flame to Hopkinton this year because of its sister-city status and connection to the prestigious Boston Marathon.

The flame was lit in November at the Greek tomb for those killed in the battle and has burned ever since. However, while Kilduff and other organizers initially agreed to take the flame before this year's Marathon, in February they asked for a one-year postponement to fully prepare.

But Zagaris was "pleasantly insistent," Kilduff said yesterday, and the flame will now arrive a week from today. The flame will remain lit as it travels in a special airline-approved container to Logan Airport and will be transferred two days later to a cauldron outside the police station, where it will be guarded by officers during the lead-up to race day.

However, while Kilduff and other organizers had hoped to light a torch with the flame and have it carried between Boston and Hopkinton by runners, the flame will now be driven to Ashland, the Marathon's original starting point until 1924. A torch will then be relayed by young area runners and Greek marathoners to Hopkinton. While the change was made to limit the flame's vulnerability, Kilduff said it gives Ashland a chance to bask in the spotlight.

"We're not quite as sensitive as we ought to be about that," Kilduff said of Ashland's loss, made to bring the course up to the modern Olympic distance of 26.2 miles.

David Foster, the creator of Ashland's opened-but-unfinished Marathon park, said his town was grateful, since it's currently best known as the home of the electric clock.

"That really doesn't get you much," Foster said. Of the flame's planned stop in his town, he added, "We do have a lot of people in Ashland who would like to see this happen."

While the police station's cauldron will be equipped to host an "eternal flame," Kilduff and other organizers said they hoped the flame might later be moved to a permanent structure, such as a proposed Hopkinton Marathon museum.

"I just think this is unbelievable," Hopkinton Marathon Committee Chairwoman Dorothy Ferriter said of the initiative.

Reached by phone, selectmen Chairwoman Muriel Kramer said Hopkinton was grateful for the gift of the flame.

"It's a nice centerpiece item to highlight our sister city relationship and our connection to the Marathon," she said.

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