LEBANON LAKE OWNERS ON THE HOOK FOR CLEANUP

A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature."

If Henry David Thoreau, were alive today, and writing about Amston Lake on the border of Hebron and Lebanon, he might also say: "It is earth's sewer, looking into which the taxpayer measures the depth of his own pocketbook."

This libertarian-leaning commentary was prompted by a news story published by The Courant on Sept. 17. It offers a textbook example of the frustrating politics associated with private lake associations and their public overseers, as described in my recent book "Beyond Walden: the Hidden History of America's Kettle Lakes and Ponds."

People chose to live on Amston Lake in the early 20th century for the same reason that Thoreau chose to live at Walden Pond: It was beautiful. This wasn't a problem during the era of outhouses and privies, when only a few people visited as seasonal residents or as weekend members of a fish and game club. By mid-century, during the era of on-site wastewater disposal by septic tanks, the lake was seen as so nice that the entire shoreline was privately purchased, developed and rimmed with more than 700 cottages, many of which were converted into year-round homes. Fortunately, residents of the increasingly crowded lake formed the Amston Lake Association to manage common problems, develop a sense of community and preserve property values.

This type of "think locally, act locally," model of self-government works beautifully on sovereign island nations. Amston Lake is hardly that, bordered by separate electorates with separate budgets, and within a state that must comply with the federal Clean Water Act and state corollaries. So, in 1986, the state Department of Environmental Protection ordered both towns to upgrade their antiquated septic systems with sewers. The more suburban Hebron complied, spending $13 million using federal and state grants and levying fees on lakeshore owners. The more rural Lebanon did not. As predicted, an unknown number of septic tanks on the Lebanon side are now seriously leaking, compromising public health and recreational enjoyment.

Now, attempts will be made to sweet-talk the voters of Lebanon into authorizing a lake cleanup. If the vote fails in May 2010, as expected, the DEP will help the town figure out why before a re-vote in May 2011. If that vote fails, the case will be officially referred by the DEP to Attorney General Richard Blumenthal for legal sanctions in 2012 and beyond.

This timeline doesn't work for the Amston Lake District, a quasi-governmental taxing district formed in 2002 that asked Blumenthal to move ahead against Lebanon. He has assigned a lawyer to the case, in part because the state does have a legitimate role in regulating private lakes, for example; issues involving downstream pollution and invasive species.

But why should the whole town of Lebanon - proud of its low taxes as well as its agricultural and Revolutionary War heritage - pay dearly for a lake that 86 percent of its residents have no legal right to use? I reached this estimate by dividing the town's 2,585 households by the number of Lebanon households estimated to be on Amston Lake. Why, during a protracted financial recession, should an upland town put a fiscal priority on a private lake so unimportant to the community that it's not even mentioned on the town's official website?

Lebanon and Hebron were founded as highland farming towns that ended up with a backwater lake between them. The Amston Lake Association is the natural entity of focus, not Lebanon, not Hebron
and not the state, which has been spending my tax dollars on this problem for a quarter-century. Hebron shoreline owners have already paid. It's only fair that those on the Lebanon side do the same. After that, let the lake association members manage their little slice of heaven - at their expense. I'm sure that given the power, they would do a good job.