THE WRONG COURSE:

It's not nice to kick a man when he's down. But I have no alternative. The proposal by New York developer Roland W. Betts to build a "world class" championship golf course in northern Litchfield County is such a colossally stupid idea that I feel compelled to say so in print.

For the past five years, Betts has been planning, permitting, designing and lobbying for a 780-acre, high-end luxury course on the highlands of North Canaan and Norfolk, just south of the Massachusetts line. In response, local residents, environmental groups and state and federal agencies have become alarmed by the potential negative impacts to wildlife habitat, groundwater aquifers, Class A trout streams and the sense of community. Sometime this month the state Department of Environmental Protection is expected to rule on this classic case of private interest vs. public benefit. I look forward to the DEP's disapproval.

I have no vested interest in the project. I'm neither rich enough to own nearby land or play at the proposed course. I'm neither a technical consultant or day-tripping tourist. In fact, I don't know anything about the project beyond what I read in a front-page, feature article in the Aug. 27 Hartford Courant by Rinker Buck. My purpose is to reinforce the words of state Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, who reportedly said, "The developer can always walk away from an economic failure. ... But the state of Connecticut can't walk away from an environmental disaster." Beyond supporting his position, I also wanted to share with readers what I found most intriguing.

I'm delighted to read that the golf industry is in recession. Apparently, golf widows are less tolerant than a generation ago. Apparently, golf orphans draw more sympathy and are more demanding of daddy time. According to Buck's article, a high-end course near the proposed Yale Farm development has recruited only 185 members in four years, far below its goal of 300 members.

The pro at another nearby championship course refers to "stagnant growth in the industry." Nationwide, more courses are now closing than opening. To recoup their investment in real estate, "out-of-business" golf courses typically subdivide their links for condominium developments and oversized house lots.

Don't get me wrong. I like golf well enough to play it every other year. I even have a new set of low-end clubs -- given to me by my sons last year as a Christmas present -- my first set since high school. (I forgot to play this summer.)

What I don't like about golf is that it's tough on the environment. In the case of the Yale Farm proposal in Litchfield County, there will be the obvious problems associated with clear-cutting trees in a repeat of hillside deforestation two centuries ago. There will be runoff problems associated with the estimated 24,000 truckloads of earth to be moved.

If fertilizer is used to keep the fairways green, then some will become nutrient pollution to streams, stimulating algal growth and gumming up what would otherwise be clear-flowing, cobbled-covered stream beds. If herbicides are used to ensure a grass monoculture, some of that will leak away, too.

The water needed during dry spells can only starve aquifers that would otherwise feed babbling brooks. The fossil fuel needed to transport golfers to this remote rural location -- some of which will fuel corporate jets from afar -- can only come from a dwindling global supply of petroleum and will only add to a climate warming. Yet, for me, these pedestrian problems pale behind the greater threat of yet another unnecessary development with oversized houses in "one of the state's last undivided grand estates ... between two state parks and ... a National Heritage Forest Area."
I do like two things about the Yale Farm proposal. It's a bold idea rather than a timid one. And Betts sets a good example by working tirelessly for what he believes in. But why should stopping one man and his minions take the combined effort of four state agencies, three federal agencies, four town commissions, two ad hoc citizens groups and three environmental groups? Wouldn't it be simpler and less expensive if we shifted our legal system to emphasize the rights of the commons?