

KEEPING IT CLEAN



Submitted photo

A group of Coventry High School students worked with Tiogue Lake residents to test bacterial counts in the water. Pictured from left: Peter Stetson, Westin Palumbo, Zachary Machado, Zachary Preiss, Grace Petrarca, Robyn Pothier, Tane Shorner, Michael Preiss and Gerry Narkiewicz.

Coventry students test for contamination on Tiogue

By KENDRA GRAVELLE

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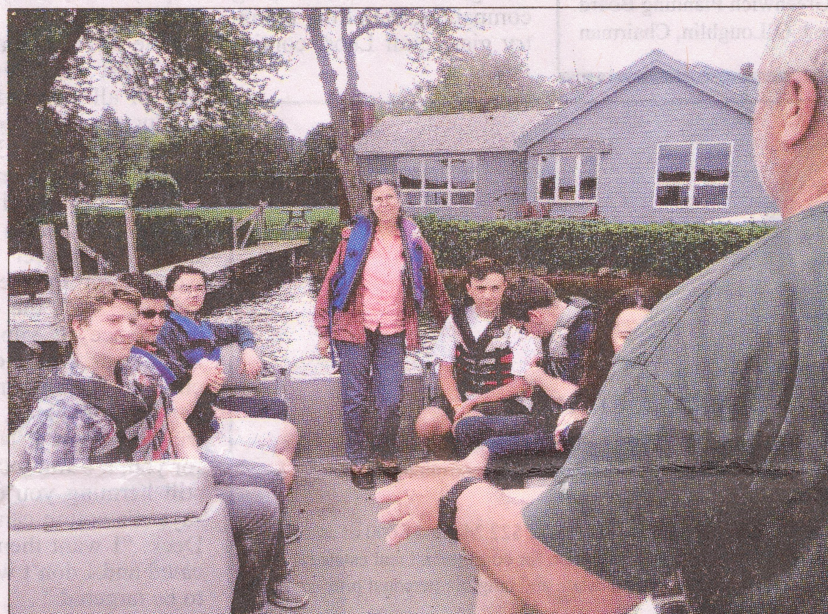
COVENTRY — The results of tests run on water samples collected from Tiogue Lake by a group of Coventry High School students have come back showing bacterial counts “far lower” than the state’s limits for public swimming, Gerry Narkiewicz, president of the Tiogue Lake Association, said Thursday.

“We’re doing something that will not just help today, but hopefully tomorrow and the day after and the year after,” Narkiewicz said of the testing, the results of which he added are “indicative of what they should be in May.”

The students, members of the high school’s Envirothon team, and their teacher Robyn Pothier joined Narkiewicz and former Envirothon leader Peter Stetson earlier this month to collect samples from several locations around the lake.

Part of the impetus for the project, Narkiewicz said Thursday, was to “get ahead of” any possible contaminations, specifically of Enterococcus bacteria.

“Lake Tiogue has had some envi-



Students take a boat trip around the lake to collect samples.

ronmental concerns in the past,” he said, “so we’re trying to get ahead of it by testing earlier in the year.”

Unusually high levels of Enterococcus, a fecal bacteria, last year left

swimmers stranded on the shore of Tiogue Lake for around three weeks in the middle of the summer.

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"[That contamination] is one of the things that we would like to try to help the town to understand," Narkiewicz said of conducting the testing, which was paid for fully by the Tiogue Lake Association.

Narkiewicz said the hope is that by conducting early testing, it'll be easier in the future to pinpoint "hot spots," or areas where bacterial loading may be occurring.

"Now, when we take samples in

July, we may see a bigger increase in one area than in another, indicating that that may be an infection point," Narkiewicz said, adding that further samples would then be taken in the early fall to try to detect a cause.

If the source of contamination is a particular swale, for example, having these initial results will help determine that.

"Maybe people frequent a swale, and they let their dog defecate in the swale and they don't clean it up—maybe that's the hotspot," Narkiewicz said.

To take the samples, Narkiewicz

and the Envirothon team set out by boat, sterile sample bottles in hand, to various points throughout the 226-acre lake. Once collected, the samples were put on ice and taken to the University of Rhode Island, where they were analyzed by Elizabeth Herron, coordinator of the Watershed Watch program.

The students, including some rising ninth graders, will continue to work with the lake association throughout the summer and into the upcoming school year to help the town prevent the recurrence of harmful bacteria in the future.

Narkiewicz, a former Coventry High School teacher, moved into town at 28 years old, and began volunteering with the Watershed Watch program shortly thereafter. Now in his 60s, he said he's "fallen in love" with Tiogue Lake.

It is, after all, what members of Watershed Watch have deemed the "jewel in the middle of suburbia."

"A lake that is in suburbia, surrounded by houses and on a pretty highly used commercial road, tends to not have the water quality that this lake has," Narkiewicz said of the "jewel."

He added, however, that he's "always amazed" at how few people are interested in the health of the lake. But by enlisting the students' help, Narkiewicz said he hopes to inspire an overall increase in environmental awareness.

And the students, he added, couldn't have been more eager to help out.

"They were jumping out of their shoes," said Narkiewicz, who taught math at the high school for some 20 years. "They're intelligent, thoughtful, young people. They really, really care."