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Solberg airport takes center stage in Readington election

By BRANDON LAUSCH
Staff Writer

READINGTON -- As is usually the case with township politics, Solberg-Hunterdon Airport is dominating this year's campaign for two Township Committee seats.

Republican incumbents Tom Auriemma and Beatrice Muir are running for re-election as supporters of the township's recently filed eminent domain suit to acquire the airport's development rights and the 625 acres of land surrounding it.

Democratic challengers Harvey Baron and William Courtney are arguing that the township used eminent domain too quickly and hasn't earnestly attempted to settle the dispute outside of court.

"No one is really seeing the issues here," said Courtney, a 25-year Readington resident who works as a lawyer. "Litigation is not communication, and it should be used as a last resort. They have not attempted to resolve this."

Failed negotiations

Courtney and Baron have proposed that the township and the Solbergs use a facilitator -- one step further than a professional mediator, which the Solbergs have suggested -- to not only bring both sides into discussion, but also to include neutral experts to help resolve the dispute.

The Township Committee has said it needs to stop the possibility of airport expansion immediately and has argued that the Solbergs have derailed discussions because they have given evasive answers when pressed on their plans for the property.

The township's latest legal step in this process occurred Thursday, as Readington filed a \$21.7 million check in state Superior Court as a declaration of taking the Solberg property.

"The Township Committee spent many months in negotiations with the Solbergs and offered them an expansion of hangar space and other modernization plans that does not envision serving jet aircraft and encroachment on the township's natural resources," Auriemma said via e-mail. "The offer was flatly denied, declaring the township's offer a complete impasse. This was just another attempt in many years that the Solbergs spent delaying and avoiding the township's good-faith efforts to resolve this matter, and in doing so left us no choice on how to proceed."

Fresh ideas

Auriemma, a committee member since 2004 who is currently serving as deputy mayor, said the township's decision to file a condemnation suit represented the only option the committee had to preserve the open space and natural resources around the airport.

Courtney said the all-Republican committee could use a minority voice to bring fresh ideas to the township and to come up with creative approaches to preserve land. Courtney, who has a degree in urban planning, said he wants to see Readington develop a master plan that focuses on town centers, which he said could promote economic development and community involvement.

"Planning has to be more focused on what we're going to do with Readington, not what we're not going to do with Readington," he said.

Auriemma said Readington's planning policies have worked to preserve land while making good use of numerous state and county funding programs. Auriemma said the township's master plan and Open Space Preservation Program both work to control growth and stabilize tax rates.

Baron, an orthopedic surgeon who ran unsuccessfully for a Township Committee seat in 2003, said that along with resolving the Solberg dispute and promoting smart development, open government is a key issue for the Democratic slate. "We will provide the public with what they need to know," Baron said. "And you're not going to get it from those two. You're not going to get it."

Some residents, including Courtney, recently criticized the Township Committee for not alerting the public of the township's eminent domain suit before it was filed.

Auriemma said the committee was following instructions by the township's attorney to not publicly announce the move because doing so could have weakened the township's case.