

Courier News
October 10, 2006

Solbergs granted extension in airport suit

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READINGTON -- The owners of Solberg-Hunterdon Airport have been granted a two-week extension to respond to the township's eminent domain suit, township counsel James Rhatican and airport co-owner Suzanne Solberg Nagle said Monday.

Rhatican said the township last week granted an extension request made by Laurence B. Orloff, a senior partner of Roseland-based Orloff, Lowenbach, Stifelman & Siegel.

The extension moves the Solbergs' court date from Oct. 20 to Nov. 3, Rhatican and Nagle said. During the hearing, the Solbergs will need to convince a Superior Court judge that the township does not have the legal right to condemn the airport. If the Solbergs fail, eminent domain proceedings will continue.

Nagle said this is the first time Orloff will represent the Solbergs. Nagle said she could not comment on why she and airport co-owners Thor and Lorraine Solberg chose Orloff to defend the family's airport.

Orloff will now be a central figure in a debate that has dominated township politics for years. The controversy over the airport has centered on the possibility that the Solbergs could expand their 102-acre airport's runway to accommodate larger planes or jet traffic.

While the Solbergs have long contended they wouldn't significantly change the airport without public input, township officials have grown increasingly frustrated with what they've characterized as evasive responses from the family about their intentions.

The township repeatedly has argued that any expansion would threaten open space and natural resources, as well as residents' quality of life.

This summer, township officials commissioned two appraisals of the property and offered the higher of the two -- \$21.7 million -- to the Solbergs for the airport's development rights. Lawmakers said they would leave operation of the airport to the Solbergs, who have owned the airport for more than 65 years.

Solberg legal counsel Lawrence Berger responded to the appraisals by saying the township's offer was "not a viable option for either the Solbergs or the aviation community," but did not make another proposal. In doing so, the Township Committee said the Solbergs declared an impasse and filed the condemnation suit.