

Airport debate rages in Readington

Supporters, critics of eminent domain plan crowd committee meeting.

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READINGTON — The dividing force of Solberg-Hunterdon Airport continued to slice through the township Monday, as residents publicly debated the rights and wrongs of condemning the airport during a Township Committee meeting.

One by one, residents either chastised or lauded township officials for recently filing a condemnation suit in state Superior Court for the development rights

to the airport and the 625 acres of open space surrounding it.

The township's move was followed by a \$21.7 million declaration of taking, which by state law contends, "Readington shall be vested with the right to the immediate exclusive possession of and the title to the interests in the property."

And unless a Superior Court judge finds the township's eminent domain action unlawful during a Nov. 3 hearing, the township will own the 625 acres that surround the family-owned

airport.

About 60 people attended Monday's meeting, and supporters and critics of the eminent domain suit were visibly divided. On the left side of the hall were the township's proponents, arguing that lawmakers did all they could to resolve with the Solberg family a long-running dispute over the possibility of airport expansion.

"The only course left for us is eminent domain," shouted Abraham Farsiou, a longtime township supporter, who said he couldn't believe his neighbors would want "to destroy our quality of life" by

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supporting the Solbergs.

On the right side of the hall sat a chorus of the township's critics, who repeatedly said officials have squandered money on public relations firms to promote a myth that the general aviation airport would someday expand its runway to welcome jet traffic. Many of them wore stickers with the words "Eminent Domain Abuse" slashed by a red line.

Don Baldwin, one of the Township Committee's fiercest critics, said lawmakers were subverting private property rights and burning millions of dollars in legal fees with their condemnation suit.

"I am ashamed of what you are doing, and you should be, too," Baldwin said to close his remarks.

Other critics, such as Whitehouse Station resident Mark Rosenberg, lashed out at the committee for the "broken promises" of assuring residents that the township would spend no more than the voter-approved \$22 million on its condemnation suit.

Rosenberg said many residents are concerned with the "cavalier way in which the committee is

spending, and in our view, wasting" taxpayers' money.

The township repeatedly has argued that any expansion of the 102-acre airport would threaten open space and natural resources, as well as residents' quality of life.

After filing the eminent domain suit, Mayor Gerard Shamey said last month that the Solbergs "have left us no choice on how to proceed" to resolve the decades-long dispute" because the family, he said, "has spent many years delaying and avoiding the township's good-faith efforts to resolve this matter."

Township resident Bill McGrath challenged that claim Monday, arguing that the township took a "deliberately adversarial position in regard to this issue" when filing the lawsuit.

"This town needs a little healing, and we need some closure," McGrath said, adding that mediation between the Solbergs and the township "would give us a little of both."

During Monday's meeting, that didn't appear likely. By 9:45 p.m. — as it has for years — the township debate raged on.

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