

# Citizens' group sues over Solberg dispute

Taxpayer group fears  
Readington may spend  
more than allotted to  
settle airport argument

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**READINGTON** — A taxpayer group is suing the township over the ongoing Solberg-Hunterdon Airport dispute, claiming the Township Committee is putting tax dollars at risk by trying to grab the airport's land "in violation of their representations to the public and the limits of their authority."

The lawsuit, filed Sept. 7 in Hunterdon County Superior Court by Whitehouse Station resident Kevin J. Devine and the Taxpayers' Alliance of Readington, takes issue with the township's recent appraisals of the airport property and with the possibility of eminent domain proceedings. The suit is signed by Woodbridge real estate attorney Steven Firkser of Greenbaum, Rowe, Smith & Davis.

Firkser declined comment on the suit. Devine was not available Thursday night for comment.

The suit claims the township is running the risk of spending more than the approved \$22 million voters passed in May to restrict the airport's deed and to purchase the development rights to 625 acres of open space surrounding it. The township has long

argued that unless the airport is deed-restricted or the development rights are municipally owned, the Solbergs could expand the airport's runway to accommodate larger plans or jet traffic, which would diminish residents' property values and quality of life.

The Solbergs have repeatedly said they want to retain the land surrounding the 102-acre airport as a buffer from other properties and have accused the township of trying to grab the family's land through eminent domain.

The lawsuit says a court should declare the township is not authorized to use any bond money if more than \$22 million is spent. The suit adds the township also should not be able to use the bond ordinance to make a deposit in connection with any eminent domain action because condemnation would be "vigorously contested in a protracted and costly battle."

In addition, the suit claims the two township-commissioned appraisals of the airport that recently valued the property at \$20.5 million and \$21.7 million "leave the defendants with no flexibility to negotiate" with the Solbergs.

The suit asks for a declaratory judgment to limit acquisition costs and asks a court to declare the township's July 11 ordinance to formally acquire the airport "arbitrary, capricious and unreasonable."

Mayor Gerard Shamey, who could not immediately be reached for comment, has said the township's goal is not to pursue eminent domain but to negotiate a reasonable plan to modernize the airport while protecting the township's open space.

Both Thor Solberg and Suzanne Solberg Nagle, who own the airport with sibling Lorraine Solberg, said they were aware of the lawsuit but were not involved in its filing.

"We wholeheartedly support any taxpayer action that is out there to protect the resources of the taxpayers and town," Thor Solberg said.

He added that the Solbergs have been in touch with the Taxpayers' Alliance and said the family will continue to contact "any other organizations in town that are fighting for taxpayers."