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Solberg bond set for a vote

May 16 election to decide fate of \$22 million airport bond

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READINGTON — Voters will head to the polls May 16 for a special election to decide the fate of the \$22 million bond that the township approved to buy the development rights to Solberg-Hunterdon Airport and its surrounding open space.

The special election, scheduled by the Hunterdon County Board of Elections, will be to ask voters whether they support the \$22 million bond passed by the Township Committee on Feb. 21.

Board of Election Supervisor Richard Lynch said the May 16 date was chosen because officials had to work around the April 18 Board of Education elections and the June 8 primary election dates while still providing at least 40 days to send out absentee ballots.

The special election is being forced after airport co-owners Thor and Lorraine Solberg and Suzanne Solberg-Nagle circulated a petition asking that a public vote be taken on the township's use of the bond.

New Jersey bond law, Mayor Gerard Shamey said, states that a bond issue must go to a public vote when a petition is received that is signed by at least 15 percent of the number of registered voters who voted in the last Assembly election.

County Clerk Dorothy Tirpok said 6,457 people voted in the township in the last general election, meaning 969 signatures were needed on a petition to force a vote on the bond's use.

Although it was not disclosed how many signatures were received and approved for the petition, Thor Solberg has said more than 1,800 signatures were collected.

Shamey said the bond's purpose is to offer the Solberg family a contingency-free cash offer to buy the development rights to the 76-acre airport to prevent an expansion of the airport's main runway from its licensed length of 3,735 feet to the roughly 5,000 feet officials said the Solbergs proposed during negotiations with the township.

The township also wants to use the bond money to buy 650 acres of open space surrounding the airport. Shamey has said the proposed expansion would permit jet traffic, which officials argue would negatively affect property values and quality of life.

The Solberg family has repeatedly said that the airport is not for sale, that any proposed expansion is for safety purposes only and that the bond's approval is a step toward the township's use of eminent domain to acquire the property. Shamey has said that, ideally, the township will not have to pursue condemnation of the airport.

Township Committee member Frank Gatti has said the cost of the bond to taxpayers depends greatly on whether the township can get a Green Acres grant and a low-interest loan from the New Jersey Environmental Infrastructure Trust.

With a grant and 20-year loan at 4.5 percent interest, the owner of a home assessed at the township average of \$400,000 would pay \$60 more a year in property taxes, officials have said.

Without that funding, property taxes would go up \$55 a year for the first three years, then \$165 a year for the next 17 years.

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