

## Solbergs owe the public an explanation

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We're not fans of Readington's hardball tactics with the Solberg family, wielding the eminent domain hammer to gain control of the future of Solberg-Hunterdon Airport.

But the Solbergs aren't helping themselves in the court of public opinion with their continued dance around the extent of what they really want to do with the airport. There is, as a result, more and more reason to be skeptical about the owners' claims that they'd be happy operating the airport as it is for a long time to come.

The Solbergs and Readington officials have been locked in a bitter feud for years about possible expansion of the facility. The township wants to buy the airport's development rights to secure it against any major future growth. Thor Solberg, one of the owners, has repeatedly said the airport is not for sale and that he has no grand expansion plans.

But what Solberg actually does want to do with the airport remains entirely unclear. He has talked of additional runway paving and other upgrades and improvements but portrays those plans as being little more than general concepts and cocktail napkin sketches, as if he hasn't really thought any of it through.

Most recently, in response to an August letter from the township's legal counsel spelling out proposed restrictions on future use of the airport, Solberg's attorney, Lawrence Berger, countered with a perfunctory six sentences that the limitations were "not a viable option." It also emphasized the need in any negotiations to accommodate "reasonable modernization" of the airport, while providing no detail on what such modernization might include.

Some modernization is undoubtedly needed, for safety reasons at the very least. Those changes could include the additional paving, a repositioning of the runway as it relates to buildings on the site, and other upgrades. But why not spell them all out right now? That's the only way the two sides might have a chance at meshing their disparate goals into an approach that satisfies everyone.

Instead, the Solbergs offer only a vague, open-ended response that won't appease Readington officials, who are fearful of the prospect of a stealthy expansion plan somehow slipping beyond their control into the hands of state and federal government. The Solbergs operate a private business, and as such are under no formal obligation to reveal any business plans to the public. But an airport is different from what a local restaurant might have in mind for its banquet room. The impact of an expanded airport on the community and surrounding towns is simply too great to justify corporate secrecy. The public deserves better.

After all this time and all of these battles over the airport for years, we find it difficult to believe the Solbergs don't have a much clearer idea than they're letting on about what they'd like to do with the airport in the short and long term. If they can't -- or won't -- detail those plans in public, even under the eminent-domain pressures closing in around them, that's a strong indication that their visions don't match up with much of the township's.

There is a lot of disingenousness going around on both sides of this equation. If the township is serious about making a fair deal, officials have to allow the Solberg family some freedom to operate and upgrade the airport in the years ahead. But it would help to know what the Solbergs want. And if they won't tell, it's a good guess that Readington won't like the answer.

Agree? Disagree? Tell us at [cnreact@c-n.com](mailto:cnreact@c-n.com).

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