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Airport owners intend to respond to township offer

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By **ANDREA EILENBERGER**
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READINGTON TWP. | The family that owns Solberg Airport has yet to respond to the township committee's \$21.7 million offer for the purchase of land surrounding the airport and the development rights to the airport.

The formal offer was delivered to the owners Aug. 10 and township officials gave the Solbergs until Friday to respond. After that, officials reserved the right to initiate condemnation proceedings.

Airport co-owner Suzy Solberg Nagle said Monday her family plans to meet with an attorney and respond by the end of the week.

"We're willing to negotiate something," Nagle said. "We're hoping they'll agree to a mediator so we can put our best foot forward and get an amicable resolution."

In May, voters gave the township the right to borrow up to \$22 million for the potential purchase. Township officials want to preserve the 624 acres of open space and ensure the 102-acre airport does not undergo a significant expansion.

Nagle said the family is willing to discuss selling development rights for a certain amount of open space, but said they have not yet formulated a response to the township or an official negotiating position.

Township Mayor Gerard Shamey said while he is willing to consider a range of options at this point, the "best scenario is for the township to purchase the land outright."

Funding opportunities, particularly for assistance through the New Jersey Environmental Infrastructure Trust, are greater with an outright purchase, he said.

Acquiring the development rights doesn't guarantee the township's preservation interests as well as buying the property, said James Rhatican, the township's special counsel.

Future state or federal attempts to expand or purchase the property could supercede municipal development rights, he said.

Shamey said if the family responds by Friday, officials will consult their attorney and decide the next course of action, which would likely be to schedule a meeting with the owners. If they do not respond by Friday, Shamey said officials will consult with the attorney before determining the next course of action.

While the Solbergs have stressed their desire to include a mediator in future negotiations, Shamey said he doesn't feel that strategy would be productive at this point because the family has not presented a formal position.

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