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Shamey unashamed of keeping suit quiet

Township sues airport. Public learns of legal action a week later.

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By **ANDREA EILENBERGER**
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READINGTON TWP. | Mayor Gerard Shamey on Monday defended the committee's decision to keep private an eminent domain lawsuit against Solberg Airport until a week after it was filed.

Shamey said officials didn't want to jeopardize their legal strategy in an attempt to acquire the land surrounding the Solberg Airport and the development rights to the airport.

Township committee members instructed an attorney to file the suit during a Sept. 12 closed door meeting, but didn't publicly announce the move until 10 days later.

"I don't apologize for any of that," Shamey said.

Shamey said announcing the suit before it made its way to the assignment judge in Somerset County could have weakened the township's position by allowing another party to file opposing legal papers.

During Monday's committee meeting resident Karen Jenkin said she felt officials were "sneaky" and "underhanded" by keeping the information from the public. She attended a committee meeting a few days later and said Shamey never mentioned the lawsuit when briefly discussing the airport issue.

"It bothers me and it bothers a lot of people," Jenkin said.

During the heated exchange between Shamey and Jenkin, Shamey invited any doubters of the township's strategy to "bring it on," and he would defend his actions.

The township committee previously adopted legislation allowing them to take necessary steps to acquire the property. That action was taken in public and was properly noticed -- not kept from the public, officials said Monday.

Also, committee members voted to hire an outside firm to handle public information requests. Shamey said

two township residents' requests for about 17 items have resulted in "voluminous" amounts of information.

The task is too time-consuming for the township administrator and attorney to handle, he said.

Officials are now in a complex, "new era" of the Solberg issue that must be handled carefully, Shamey said.

Jenkin noted officials' claims they tried to conduct good faith negotiations with the Solbergs before filing the suit.

"I don't think this was good faith on your part," Jenkin said.

Bill Courtney, an attorney who is running in November's election for a seat on township committee, agreed with Jenkin. He believes the move became public information when it was filed in court.

"You cannot hide behind executive session," Courtney said.

He said officials need to be open with the township.

"You don't hide things from your client," which in this case, consists of township residents, Courtney said.

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