



## THE EXPRESS-TIMES

### **Solberg Airport saga takes testy turn**

**Meeting becomes forum for accusations between those for, against condemnation.**

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**By ANDREA EILENBERGER**  
**The Express-Times**

READINGTON TWP. | The Solberg Airport condemnation debate was waged once again during Monday's township committee meeting. Some lauded officials' dedication, some questioned their legal standing and others flat-out accused officials of lying to the public.

The issue has divided the township for years, and it appeared to split the municipal meeting room down the middle.

Residents on one side encouraged officials' efforts to acquire land around the airport while those across the aisle criticized them.

Township officials took no action on the airport Monday night. The meeting instead became a forum for residents to vent their opinions about the contentious tug-of-war between the township and Solberg Airport.

Despite the questions surrounding the township's eminent domain proceeding, Mayor Gerard Shamey stood by the move.

"I am not in any way, shape or form ashamed" of the committee's efforts to reach resolution, Shamey said.

The township filed a declaration of taking about two weeks ago and posted money with the court for the acquisition of 624 acres of land around the airport and development rights to the 101-acre airport. The issue is headed to court Nov. 3 for a hearing.

Shamey said officials have tried to negotiate with the airport owners, but the owners did not clearly communicate their plans and positions.

As the issue progresses, the owners will likely be forced to say what's on their mind, he said.

"We're at where we're at because we couldn't get anywhere," Shamey said.

Monday night, roughly 40 residents turned out to weigh in on the case.

Some residents accused officials of misrepresenting the potential acquisition cost, arguing it will wind up costing taxpayers significantly more than the \$22 million amount voters approved in May.

Last month, a taxpayers group and resident Kevin Devine sued the township over that assertion.

Resident Mark Rosenberg on Monday called the officials' use of taxpayer money "cavalier" and requested they show "some fiscal responsibility."

Resident James Brightwell said he doesn't want to see the airport expanded, something he believes might be in the future airport owners envision.

"I support the committee's actions in this," Brightwell said.

Township officials have feared an expansion, but the owners have denied that is the case.

Bill McGrath, an attorney and township resident who is a neighbor of one of the airport owners, doesn't want to see an expansion either, whether one is in the works or not.

He suggested officials consider negotiating with the airport owners through a mediator, something they have previously rejected.

"The only downside to you is that mediation is not successful," McGrath wrote in a statement. "But if you participated in good faith and honestly tried to strike a deal, your litigation position may be stronger and you may have built a broader consensus among the Township's residents."

He also cited a county superior court judge's ruling in a 2004 condemnation case, which was dismissed, as possible hurdles for the township.

"No one would question that (open space, farmland, historic and wildlife preservation) are worthy goals, but whether they are pressing needs for the township, that justifies the use of eminent domain is another matter," McGrath wrote.

Committeewoman Julia Allen stressed how important preserving the land around the airport is to the township's goals, something which will increase over time.

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