

Residents Say More About Taking Airport

By Conor Greene

READINGTON TWP. — Residents who support and oppose the township's use of eminent domain to acquire control over Solberg Airport took turns letting their feelings be known at Monday's Township Committee meeting. But with a condemnation complaint already filed, it's unlikely their statements will have any effect on the process.

The township and Solberg family are due in court Nov. 3 when a judge will decide if the township is acting appropriately in its decision to use its powers of eminent domain to force a purchase of 624 acres of open space surrounding the airport and the development rights on 102 acres used for actual airport operations.

With a declaration of taking filed in court, the township will take title of the land unless a judge rules in favor of the Solbergs. As part of the court complaint, the township deposited \$21.7 million, representing its formal offer, into a trust account.

During Monday's public comment portion, residents marched to the podium to either admonish officials for abusing their rights of eminent domain and squandering tax money or voice support for the efforts to block a possible expansion of the airport's facilities.

On Tuesday, Mayor Gerard Shamey said that, even with the process moving into the courts, it is still worthwhile for residents to express themselves. "Speaking for myself, nothing is moot," he said. "I heard and understood their feelings and frustrations, and... I don't see someone who opposes our efforts as

a demon or wrong, just as disagreeing."

While saying that he can handle residents calling him names, he did admit that the process has weighed on officials. "It gets very difficult when you feel like you are trying to do something positive for the township and preserve a certain way of life," he said of the criticism. "It stings a little to be called a liar and Nazi. It doesn't feel good. I was not enjoying it."

At the meeting, Whitehouse Station resident Mark Rosenberg said, "I'm very opposed to what I see as abuse of eminent domain... for no legitimate reason and against the property owner's wishes," he said. "A lot of residents are very concerned about the large amounts of money you are spending. I request that you show fiscal responsibility and be more careful with our money."

The feelings of the roughly 50 residents at the meeting were apparent simply by which side of the meeting room they were sitting, with many against the use of eminent domain in a group wearing stickers reading "Eminent Domain Abuse" crossed out by a red line.

James Brightwell, treasurer of BRAAC, a group opposed to an airport expansion, said claims by residents that the ultimate cost of the purchase is unknown aren't valid because the process is guided by state-approved appraisers. "I support the committee's action in this," he said, adding that inaction could result in an airport capable of handling activity similar to Teterboro.

John Altonji of Lake Cushetunk Woods told officials they aren't making the best use of his tax money. "I'd rather be putting that money towards education my grandchildren," he said. "People are completely brainwashed thinking that if the township doesn't buy the property (it)... is going to turn into a jetport," he said.

But for some residents, the use of condemnation is the only solution that will guarantee that their property values aren't affected by an air-

port expansion. "The only course left for us is eminent domain," said Abraham Farsiou of Whitehouse Station.

Mayor Shamey told the audience that "none of us want to be where we are today." Responding to claims made by residents such as Don Baldwin, who told officials, "I am ashamed of what you are doing, and you should be, too," the mayor said that he is "in no way, shape or form ashamed" of his efforts regarding the airport.