

PROPOSED AIRPORT DEAL

Solbergs Hold Firm In Seeking Mediator

By Conor Greene

READINGTON TWP. — The owners of Solberg Airport say they will respond to the township's \$21.7 million offer by tomorrow's deadline to avoid the start of eminent domain proceedings.

An Aug. 21 letter from siblings Thor and Lorraine Solberg and Suzy Nagle Solberg didn't address the offer, tendered Aug. 10 and giving until tomorrow to either accept or commit to continue negotiations.

Instead, the Solbergs' letter again requests that township officials "join with the partners of Solberg Aviation to identify a qualified and impartial mediator to assist us in resolving this matter." Township special counsel Jay Rhatican responded in a letter the following day that "the Committee is not presently interested in using a third-party mediator in connection with its preservation efforts relating to Solberg Airport."

Mr. Solberg and Mrs. Nagle Solberg both said Tuesday that a follow-up letter addressing the offer would be sent to the township by Friday. Both have expressed disagreement with the township's recent appraisals and have said repeatedly that the property is not for

sale. The family will meet with an attorney today, they said.

The township's Aug. 10 offer was for an outright purchase of 624 acres of open space surrounding the airport and for the development rights on 102 acres used for airport operations. The proposal represents less than the family was offered several years ago by the state. The airport owners say they would be willing to sell the development rights on some of the open space but want to keep ownership of the property that the family has owned for 70 years.

Mayor Gerard Shamey said Tuesday that officials are concerned that requests for the use of a mediator is a "delay tactic." In his letter, Mr. Rhatican wrote that if the family "truly wishes to utilize the services of a mediator, the Committee asks that you respond with a clear, written statement of the issues proposed to be mediated and state in writing the position you intend to present the mediator." Officials have said that the only room for a mediator in the process would be to determine a sale price, and they won't allow an expansion of the airport's runway length beyond 3,735 feet.

"The committee doesn't feel a mediator would be helpful if Solberg Aviation insists on having the opportunity to expand the airport into the open space we want to preserve," Mayor Shamey said. "I want to meet with them at least once without mediators, as some issues are just not properly within the scope of mediation." He said that even if the Solbergs' response isn't received by tomorrow, the Township Committee will wait at least until its Sept. 5 meeting to authorize Mr. Rhatican to file condemnation papers in court.

Mrs. Solberg Nagle expressed hope Tuesday that the township will allow a mediator to join the proceedings. "There is a solution, but we need a mediator, and it would be nice if they agree to that," she said. "He would act as a facilitator, keep the dialogue going and explain the viewpoints to try to reach both our goals. I think it can be done, and I think it's what the voters wanted, and what the committee says they want."