

Solbergs: Let Airport Modernize

By Conor Greene

READINGTON TWP. — Township officials met in closed session Tuesday to discuss the formal response by Solberg Aviation to an offer of \$21.7 million on airport property.

No action was taken after the approximately 90-minute closed-door session, and officials will again discuss their options in another private session during Monday's Township Committee meeting. They must de-

cide how to proceed in light of the Sept. 7 response submitted by Morristown attorney Lawrence Berger on behalf of the Solberg family.

"We are prepared to negotiate ... a purchase of the Solberg property and development rights as long as the town is willing to entertain a reasonable modernization plan for the airport," Mr. Berger wrote. "Freezing the airport in place as the town as previously suggested, and limiting the use of the airport in the manner

set forth (on Aug. 29) is not a viable option for either the Solbergs or the aviation community."

Siblings Thor and Lorraine Solberg and Suzy Solberg Nagle were granted a two-week extension last month to mull the township's offer, and Mr. Berger's letter was sent to township special counsel Jay Rhatican one day before the deadline. The township seeks to buy 624-acres of open space surrounding the airport and the development rights on 102 acres used for airport operations to prevent an expansion that would allow the airport to serve corporate jets.

However, Mr. Rhatican and Mayor Gerard Shamey weren't thrilled with the lack of details included in the response. "I don't think this is a definitive response," Mr. Rhatican said. "I think it's vague, non-committal and simply doesn't provide any clear enunciation by the Solbergs of what they wish to do."

"If anything is clear in this, it is that they want to expand the airport," he said. "I think the committee agrees that the airport needs to be modernized, but if that includes an expansion of the airport facilities

into the open space around the airport, I doubt that will be acceptable to the committee."

Mayor Shamey also questioned what the Solbergs meant by "a reasonable modernization plan," but was encouraged that the family appears willing to discuss a sale with the township. "I thought it was vague, and I thought it contained some good news," he said. "They have indicated they are prepared to negotiate a purchase; however, the letter doesn't specify what a reasonable modernization plan is. At this point, if they have something in mind, I can either get out my crystal ball and figure out what it is, or they can tell us," he said.

Ms. Nagle refused on Monday to comment further on what kind of modernization the family wants to do.

Now officials must decide whether to press Solberg Aviation for a concrete proposal that spells out what improvements they have in mind. Mayor Shamey says "the ball is still in (the family's) court," but added that the committee will likely heed Mr. Rhatican's advice and respond with a follow-up letter.