

THE HUNTERDON COUNTY NEWS

- Breaking News -

08/30/06

TITLE: LETTER TO THE EDITOR - THE SOLBERG TWO STEP aka - the Readington land grab

DESCRIPTION:

Time: 09:09:46

ARTICLE

British philosopher and Nobel Prize winner Bertrand Russell once observed:

“There is no nonsense so errant that it cannot be made the creed of the vast majority by adequate governmental action.” Nowhere is Mr. Russell’s observation truer than in the Readington, NJ.

This past spring Readington residents witnessed an extraordinary event. On the heels of the perennial defeat of the local school budget, voters approved, by a margin of about 5 to 4, a jumbo bond that would pave the way for two rather disturbing things to happen.

First, the \$22 million borrowing would bloat our municipal debt by around 47%. Secondly, these new funds would enable our Township Committee to condemn 650 acres of private property. Of course the explanatory statement printed on the ballots of our special election didn’t mention anything about eminent domain. The ballot referred only to “preservation” efforts around the airport.

But the unusual bond did pass and a lot of good people voted for it. And how did this unlikely proposal succeed? It passed because our public officials insisted that Solberg Airport was about to blossom into a big jet port and the NJ DOT was going to back the expansion. After all, the Solberg land area is bigger than LaGuardia we were told. Just think of what might happen.

And this unwelcome development would be propelled by a document that the DOT created. It was called an Environmental Assessment report and it was a forgone conclusion, according to our Mayor and Committee, who had never actually read the report, that it would recommend a major expansion of this

small airport that predates most of our homes. Our china would be rattling off the shelf and our kids would have to shout to be heard in our schools.

The came the big surprise. The EA report actually recommended just the opposite of what Readington had told us. The DOT advised *against* any expansion of Solberg. The FAA and the Port Authority also disclosed that they had no expansions planned. Without the huge grants and approvals from these government agencies, infrastructure changes at Solberg airport would be virtually impossible.

Curiously though, we were told, the EA document that was no longer relevant. That's when it became obvious that the Committee's campaign to garner bond support was to justify a huge land grab. But still, how do you get voters to buy into such an underhanded and expensive agenda?

If you are the Readington Township Committee, you do several things. You hire a powerful PR/Marketing firm and ply them public money. You deny that a condemnation is being considered. You don't threaten a family business and you speak fondly of its history. You insist that it won't cost much per household in taxes. You offer reassurance that the purchase price is a "not to exceed" figure. You add that *not* supporting the bond could damage home values. And finally, you tell parents that the airport is a threat to the well being of their children.

I recently obtained copies of some of the bills that Readington has incurred in its efforts to get these large tracts of land. A clear picture emerges of just how many overpaid consultants and lawyers, worked around the clock to effectively promulgate the hoax. Every flyer, every speech, every power point presentation, every letter to the electorate, even remarks called into a radio station, were crafted by marketing pros. And they delivered.

Some say it is illegal for elected officials to spend tax money to promote a particular outcome in an election. I am not a legal expert, so I don't know. What I do know, is that Bertrand Russell was very astute in his observation.

Don Baldwin

Readington Township

609 548 2276

THE HUNTERDON COUNTY NEWS

email us