

Deadline nears on offer to Solbergs

Solbergs willing to discuss sale of the development rights

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READINGTON TWP. -- Although the answer won't be a simple yes, members of the Solberg family say they will meet their deadline of this Friday, Aug. 25, to respond to the township's offer of \$21.7 million for the purchase of future development rights at Solberg Airport and to buy outright ownership of the surrounding 625 acres of land.

The Solbergs are willing to talk about selling development rights to limit future expansion

'We are going to respond and tell them that we want to negotiate, as we have all along.'

SUZANNE SOLBERG NAGLE

Co-owner of Solberg Airport

at the airport rather than giving up the land that has been in the family for more than 60 years, said Suzanne Solberg Nagle last Friday. Her position was in agreement with comments made by her brother, Thor Sol-

berg Jr., on Monday, Aug. 7, the night the township's offer was made.

Nagle, one of three Solberg siblings, said the Solbergs would again ask the township to meet with the guidance of a me-

diator or facilitator to help each side see the other's point of view. Later on Monday afternoon, the Solbergs sent a letter to the Township Committee and Mayor Gerard Shamey again urging that "the Readington Township Committee join with the partners of Solberg Aviation to identify a qualified and impartial mediator to assist us in resolving this matter."

Earlier during the day, Shamey and Township Committeewoman Julia Allen said they are waiting for the Solbergs to

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lay their cards on the table as to their specific position before they would consider working on the details of an agreement alongside a mediator.

However, Thor Solberg Jr. said that the Solbergs were still working on their official response to the township's offer as of Monday afternoon.

Nagle said earlier in the day, "We are going to respond and tell them we want to negotiate, as we have all along."

Expecting A Response

Allen said on Monday that the committee "fully expects them to respond." Allen voted unanimously along with the three other committee members on Aug. 7 to present the Solbergs with the offer based on the higher of two property appraisals.

Allen added, "Basically, we want good faith, transparent negotiations."

Fears that Solberg Airport would lengthen its runway and expand into a jetport have been on and off the front burner in Readington for years. The state Department of Transportation tentatively agreed to buy the entire facility for about \$22 million in 2002, but that deal fell apart after the Solbergs countered with property appraisals valuing the

airport and land at almost double that amount.

About a year ago, the Township Committee proposed buying the entire airport property for roughly \$22 million, a move followed by negotiations with both sides, a breakdown in talks and a referendum this past May in which voters approved a \$22 million bond ordinance to pursue a deal with the airport owners.

Speaking for herself, Allen said she agreed with a resident who noted that mediation tends to work best when both sides have clearly stated their positions.

"We have clearly stated our position," Allen said. "We are waiting to hear their position." For example, committee members have consistently called upon the Solbergs to name a specific price for selling the development rights to the airport and the land around the airport.

"Mediate what?" Shamey asked on Monday afternoon. Agreeing with Allen, he said the township is still waiting for the Solbergs to name their price, and lay out the details of their position.

Nagle again said on Friday that she believes the township is on the path toward condemning their property through the state eminent domain law. She said passing a bond ordinance this

year was unnecessary for the township to conduct talks with the family. "Their credit was good with us," she said.

At the Aug. 7 meeting when the formal offer to the Solbergs was approved, Shamey emphasized, as he has in the past, that the township wants the Solbergs to retain ownership of the airport itself, while limiting a runway expansion to its current limited length of 3,750 paved feet.

The township's offer requested the Solbergs to respond within 15 days, either accepting the deal or agreeing to further negotiations, or the Township Committee reserved the right to begin eminent domain proceedings.

On Monday, Jay Rhatican, the attorney hired by the township to help work out an agreement with the Solbergs, said the package with the formal offer had been delivered to the Solbergs on Thursday, Aug. 10, and the deadline for a response was 10 days afterwards, or Friday, Aug. 25. He said he has received no further instructions from the township since Monday, Aug. 7.

Nagle said the Solbergs are looking towards a deal similar to that given to other township owners of open space, who have only sold the future development rights on their property to further the township's efforts to preserve Readington's open space.

Readington has received state, federal and county funds towards reimbursing most of the cost of those preservation deals.

"We are still asking them to consider a mediator. I think that's what the residents want," Nagle said on Friday. She said she hoped the Township Committee and Rhatican would consider the "greater good of the residents of Readington Township and that what they want is resolution, not (costly) litigation."

Nagle added she took the opportunity of a precautionary landing by Gov. Jon Corzine at the airport on Monday, Aug. 14, to explain the Solberg family's position to him. Initially, State Police held her back, but Nagle said she was eventually able to approach the governor for a few minutes. "I told him this is the airport that's under threat of eminent domain," she said.

Nagle said she told the governor a little of the area's aviation history, beginning with the story that Lightfield Road had been the emergency landing strip in the region in the 20s and 30s, even before her father, Norwegian air pioneer Thor Solberg, came out to Readington and began buying up farmland for the airport he founded in 1939. "I told him we just want to own our land," Nagle said.