

· LETTERS TO THE EDITOR ·

Land grab by the Readington Township Committee

EDITOR:

British philosopher and Nobel Prize winner Bernard Russell once observed that, "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 Township of Readington.

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 launch our municipal debt by around 47 percent in one fell swoop. By comparison, when my wife and I moved to Readington in 1995, the debt level was approximately \$9 million. With the recent bond, the current debt could rise to about \$70 million.

Secondly, these new funds would enable our five-member Township Committee to initiate a condemnation action in order to seize 624 acres of private property. Of course the explanatory statement printed on the ballots of our special election didn't mention anything about the use of eminent domain. Committee members and their advisers were very aware that most folks find that sort of a government move to be heavy-handed and distasteful. 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, you may ask, did this unlikely proposal ever succeed? It passed because our elected officials insisted that Solberg Airport was about to blossom into a big jetport and the New Jersey Department of Transportation (DOT) was going to back the expansion regardless of concerns in the community. After all, the Solberg land area is bigger than LaGuardia Airport we were told. Just think of what might happen.

And this unwelcome development would be propelled by a horrible document that the DOT created especially for this purpose. It

was called an Environmental Assessment (EA) report and it was a forgone conclusion, according to our mayor and Township Committee, who had never actually read the report, that it would recommend and support a major expansion of this small general aviation airport that predates most of our homes. It seemed we were doomed. Our china would be rattling off the shelf and our kids would have to shout to be heard in our schools. It would only be a short time before the cows might stop producing milk.

Then came a surprising turn of events. A copy of the EA report found its way into the hands of a few residents who were trying to sort out these ominous issues. As it turns out, the report is a public record and could have been available to anyone, including our elected officials who never bothered to review it. But it is what the report concluded that surprised many people on both sides of the controversy. It recommended that there be NO expansion of the existing runway, and NO paving of the crosswind runway. I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that now we didn't need a huge bond for condemnation after all.

Incredibly, the Readington Township Committee decided to move forward with the bond in spite of the facts and documents that were brought to their attention indicating that there was no threat of expansion on the horizon. The Federal Aviation Administration and the Port Authority of N.Y./N.J. also chimed in to say that they had no such plans for Solberg Airport, and a couple of concerned residents even met personally with these officials to confirm this. Without the huge grants and approvals from these state and federal agencies, infrastructure changes at Solberg Airport would be virtually impossible. In short, the Solbergs couldn't expand, even if they harbored dreams to do so.

Curiously though, we were told, the EA document that was supposedly so dangerous before was no longer relevant. That's when it became painfully obvious to some of us that the Township Committee's campaign to garner support for the prospective bond funding

was necessary to justify the biggest land grab in local history. 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 public relations/marketing firm and ply them with six figures of public money. You deny that a condemnation is being considered as Mayor (Gerard) Shaney other Township Committee members did publicly from the get go. You deny any intention to threaten a family business and you speak fondly of the facility and its history. You insist that it won't cost much per household in additional taxes, although you don't offer any detailed amortization schedule or produce any firm funding commitments from outside sources. You offer reassurances that the proposed purchase price of the land is a "not to exceed" figure. You add that not supporting the proposed bond could damage the value of your largest asset — your home. And finally, with the help of the Board of Education, you tell parents that the airport is a potential threat to the well being of their children's schools and playgrounds.

I now understand how this bond passed since I obtained copies of some of the bills that Readington has incurred in its efforts to get the large tracts of land owned by the Solberg family. A clear picture emerges of just how many overpaid consultants and lawyers worked around the clock to effectively promulgate the expansion scare to the taxpayers. Every flyer, every speech, every Power Point presentation, every letter to the electorate, even remarks called into a radio station, were crafted by professional marketing people. And they delivered. Some have suggested that it is illegal for elected officials to spend public money to promote a particular outcome in an election. I am not a legal expert so I don't know about that. What I surely do know is that Bertrand Russell was very astute in his observation many years ago.

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