

Solberg response raises more questions

Mayor wants specifics on airport's response

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READINGTON TWP. - The owners of Solberg Aviation have responded by letter to the Township Committee's \$21.7 million offer for their airport but their response apparently left township officials with more questions than answers.

The letter filed by the Solbergs' attorney, Lawrence Berger, said the Solbergs are prepared to "negotiate with the town 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."

Readington Mayor Gerard Shamey said last Friday, "Obviously, we need to know what that means. We have been asking for what they want for quite some time."

The township received the letter last Thursday, Sept. 7, one day before the date of the extended deadline attached to the Township Committee's offer as it was formally offered to the Solbergs on Aug. 10.

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Readington Township
mayor

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The township has repeatedly called for the Solbergs to limit expansion at the airport to its current licensed runway length of less than 4,000 feet long, with the goal of limiting jet traffic in and out of Readington.

The Solberg letter would probably be discussed by the Township Committee in an executive session that was likely to be held yesterday, Tuesday, Shamey said.

He said he doubted any ac-

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tion would be taken at that meeting.

Suzanne Solberg Nagle, one of the three Solberg siblings, said last Friday that the Solbergs would like to work something out. However, she declined to comment further beyond the letter.

Nagle declined to answer a specific question about whether the Solbergs were still calling for the township to seek the assistance of a mediator or facilitator to help ease the impasse between Solberg Aviation and township in discussions about the future of the airport. Talks between the two sides broke down in January.

For the past several years, the Solbergs have shown themselves reluctant to part with the airport, which they have said is a legacy from their father, the famous aviator Thor Solberg Sr. The family has also stated they believe the Township Committee still intends to condemn their property. The committee passed ordinances approving a move towards condemnation of the airport a few years ago, but later rescinded those ordinances.

Since the late 1990s, a group of township residents, joining together with some citizens from nearby Branchburg Township have expressed fears that the airport has been planning a major expansion. Township officials have been attempting to cap growth at the facility.

The letter from Berger last Thursday stated, "As we previously discussed, freezing the airport in place as the town has previously suggested, and limiting the use of the airport in the manner set forth in your letter of Aug. 29, 2006, is not a viable option for either the Solbergs or the aviation community."

Shamey specified last Friday that the township has stated its willingness to have the airport increase the length of the paved runway from the existing 3,000 feet long to 3,735 feet, its "fully licensed paved length."

The township has expressed opposition to a paved runway of 4,000 feet or more, and presented testimony by experts that paving out to that length would invite more jet traffic.

Shamey also said the Township Committee recognizes the need for safety upgrades, such as separating the main runway from the taxi runway.

"We have asked them what they want," he said last Friday, but he said that question remained unanswered by the letter received last Thursday.

Meanwhile, Shamey said, "The Solbergs have stated publicly that there's no plans to expand the airport." Berger's letter added that the Solberg Aviation owners are "of course, available for further negotiations if you think they would be fruitful. I await your advice in this respect." Some residents in the township have applauded officials' efforts to protect Readington and their own properties from the effects of a larger airport. However, other residents have criticized officials for supposedly overstepping their boundaries in seeking to buy a property that the Solbergs have stated is not for sale.