

Solbergs Have Until Sept. 8 To Respond To Township Offer

The Solberg family and partners now have until Sept. 8 to decide how they feel about the township's offer of \$21.7 million to buy and preserve 625 acres of open space around Solberg Airport, and buy the development rights for the 100 acres actually used for airport operations. The family would maintain ownership of the actual airport, and would be free to continue operating it if they wish, or to sell it, but the deal would essentially end the possibility that anyone could ever expand the recreational airport into a corporate or cargo jetport.

Solberg's attorney, Lawrence S. Berger, requested and was granted by the township 15 extra days to respond to the offer, to allow time for the Solbergs and partners to discuss it.

The Solberg family has repeatedly denied they have plans to expand the airport, but last December, Berger brought to the township a proposal for jet-capable runways and 500,000 square feet of hangar and office space. Then in January, in a tape-recorded telephone conversation, Berger told Mayor Gerard Shamey that the Solbergs needed to expand the airport so they could sell more fuel for corporate jets, explaining that is how airports make money.

The township's \$21.7 million offer was based on the greater of two independent appraisals of the raw land surrounding the airport, and the development rights for the airport itself. The number is in line with figures provided by Hunterdon County Open Space Coordinator Kevin Richardson, who said despite development pressures, raw land in Hunterdon County (land without roads, sewers or utilities) is in the high \$20,000/acre range.

There has been some confusion because the township's offer seems less than the \$22 million offered by the state in 2002, but the state's offer included an outright purchase of the entire 725-acre tract, including the airport facility. The township would not be acquiring the airport facility.

The Solbergs have made repeated requests to bring in a mediator to help settle the conflict. Shamey has said the township needs to see a counterproposal in writing from the Solbergs to determine what role a mediator might play in the negotiations. Township officials also want to identify exactly who they would be negotiating with.

Thor Solberg, who owns the airport and surrounding land along with two sisters, has said the family wants to find a solution that will satisfy everyone without creating a burden on taxpayers. In a May referendum, township voters approved spending \$22 million to acquire the land.