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Tempers soaring over airport acquisition

Readington's eminent domain proceedings anger some residents

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Readington Township officials defended the initiation of eminent domain proceedings to acquire Solberg Airport amid questions from residents about the township's tactics.

Mayor Gerard Shamey told residents at Monday night's committee meeting the township had not made a secret of its intention to use property condemnation.

"Don't tell me that the township is sneaking around and hiding things," Shamey said in response to residents' complaints. "We have a job to do, and the majority of residents want us to be successful in getting the job done. I don't apologize for any of that."

After months of referring to eminent domain as a "last resort," Readington officials filed a condemnation complaint on Sept. 15, seeking control of land surrounding the airport.

The move, as well as the committee's decision not to announce the action until Sept. 22, have since sparked criticism from residents.

"If what they're doing is correct, it should (withstand) the light of day," said Ed Dudzinski, a resident who ran unsuccessfully for a committee seat nomination in the June primary election.

Dudzinski, who recently filed an extensive request for copies of various township records relating to the airport, called the delay in making the eminent domain action public just the latest example of the committee's secrecy.

A lawsuit filed by a taxpayer watchdog group in September also accuses the township of not being straightforward with residents about the potential cost of acquiring the airport.

But Shamey said Monday the process has been an open one, citing a July ordinance authorizing "any and all action to move for ward with municipal acquisition" as proof the option of eminent domain had been made public.

The committee chose not to inform residents until Sept. 22 -- by passing the issue in a Sept. 18 committee meeting -- so as not to jeopardize the legal process of getting the complaint served, Shamey said.

Resident Karen Jenkin confronted him on the point, challenging the township's authority not to announce legal action that had been taken three days earlier.

"You had made a public move to go to court," Jenkin said. "You could've told the people in the room. The point is, you were not being honest and up front with the public."

The mayor bristled at that suggestion, saying the airport's owners -- siblings Thor Solberg, Lorraine Solberg and Suzanne Solberg Nagle -- were the ones hiding their intentions. The Solbergs are expected to be in court in two weeks to argue against condemnation.

The Solbergs' refused to describe what they had in mind for the property -- other than a "reasonable modernization plan," Shamey said. The Solbergs also failed to make a realistic counterproposal to Readington's \$21.7 million offer, resulting in an impasse in negotiations, Shamey said.

"We filed because we had no choice," Shamey said. "Every shred of information has been made available to the public."

The volume of public records requests has forced Readington to contract with an outside law firm to keep up, Shamey said Monday.

Don Baldwin, a resident and eminent-domain opponent who has made requests for airport documents, said the number of requests was a clear indication the committee has confused and frustrated the public.

"If this is open and transparent, why is all this necessary -- and why all the legal firepower, and why all the (public relations) firepower?" Baldwin said. "I think there's a lot of people who understand that there's been obstacles to transparency, and it's time people woke up because the tax money at stake here is enormous."

Township voters have approved up to \$22 million for the purchase of 625 acres of open space surrounding the airport and the development rights to 100 acres of airport facilities.

If a judge rules in the township's favor Oct. 20, a hearing would then be held to determine the property's value, based on appraisals. If either side disputes the valuation decision, the case would go before a jury.

The airport owners have said they will fight the eminent domain effort, but do not wish to comment further until Oct. 20, Nagle said Monday.

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