

# HD/ Neither Side Blinks In Airport Dog Fight 9/20/90

By Emily Colo

Negotiations between Readington Township and the Solberg family over control of Solberg Airport deadlocked Monday at a meeting attended by about 100 residents.

Neither party could sway the other from making its own application for federal funds to do a master plan study for the airport. Neither would halt its application to allow more negotiations.

Instead, the township committee voted to have airport consultant Richard Bisbal prepare its application at a cost of up to \$7,000.

The airport owners had invited the township to participate in their study, but only after they get funding approval from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The committee did not take the Solbergs up on the offer, saying the township should be included in the application process as well, preferably as sponsor or co-sponsor.

The Solbergs have submitted a pre-application to the FAA which outlines components to be included in the master plan. The committee asked the Solbergs not to submit their application yet, allowing time for a consultant to rewrite the Solbergs technical report so that it reflects township concerns.

"You're asking us not to proceed while you proceed" with a township-sponsored application and appraisals of the property, Thor Solberg said. He and the other owners said after the meeting that because the committee would not stop its application and appraisal efforts, the Solbergs "have no choice but to proceed."

Sounding like an echo of Solberg, Mayor Stephen Mirota said after the meeting, "We would have stopped our application, but they were not willing to stop theirs."

The committee also authorized an appraisal of the airport property costing \$8,500.

The Solbergs said that move indicates the township may condemn the airport to acquire it. The committee has said it would only condemn as a last resort.

The committee wants to buy part of the airport as a municipal facility, to control its future and keep it recreational, rather than commercial. The Solbergs say it is not for sale.

The Solbergs want to make improvements, and say these changes will not bring additional air traffic. The committee and many residents doubt this claim and fear that the Solbergs or future owners will expand the airport to allow larger planes and more air traffic.

The master plan study would establish future directions for the airfield. It must be completed before federal funds for either acquisition or improvement can be sought.

Mirota has said that the party who sponsors the application for master plan funds would have an edge in getting funding. But Solberg said this connection doesn't exist, and that master plan funds usually go to airport owners. The funds come from "a field tax" paid by airport users.

In their pre-application, the Solbergs said they want township officials and community members involved in building the master plan, through a steering committee. Participants would advise the airport's planner on their areas of concern.

The committee said it would not be content with an advisory role, but wants to be on an equal footing with the owners in deciding the future of the airport.

Resident Mary Ann Dandrade, a former employee of the airport, said the township should look into the realities of operating an airport. She said operating expenses, liability insurance, and dependence on weather make owning an airport very costly.