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## Solberg expansion gains fed, state OK

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Staff Writer

*Readington mayor vows to 'fight this with any means available'*

READINGTON TWP. — In what Mayor Julia Allen could only describe as a "bomb," the federal and state government have "conditionally approved" the expansion of Solberg Airport.

In doing so, they overrode the vociferous protests of several hundred local residents who con-

verged on public meetings in 1996 and 1997 to decry the expansion, which the federal government would fund to the tune of \$21.7 million.

Allen vowed Monday, April 12, that neither the Readington nor Branchburg township committees, nor the citizens group Branchburg

Readington Airport Action Coalition (BRAAC) would roll over and play dead.

"Expansion of the airport is the single most serious threat to the quality of life in Readington Township," she said after breaking the news at the Planning

Board meeting Monday night.

"We intend to fight this with any means available to us. They (Solbergs) absolutely didn't demonstrate the need" for airport expansion at the public hearings, Allen said. "We feel we are going to really invoke our rights to home rule here — to the fullest extent of

the law."

Solberg Airport owner Thor Solberg could not be reached for comment.

The local groups will combine forces to force the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) and the state DOT (Department of Trans-

portation) to show that there really is a need to pay \$21.7 million to expand an underused airport, Allen said.

They will also demand to have a true environmental impact statement detailing the noise and air pollution that would result. (Please see Solberg on page 14.)

### Solberg

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from the expansion, as well as having the FAA and DOT demonstrate how the expansion plan complies with the state's plan to contain sprawl.

The proposal includes replacing a 3,700-foot runway with one 5,600 feet long, leading many to believe the airport will be used by jets — a suspicion Solberg strongly denies. Airport officials have said the longer runway will simply make it safer for the existing class of airplanes to use the site, with the number of planes increasing from about 95 now to 157 by 2015.

Many residents, though, predict the expansion will destroy their rural way of life through greatly increased noise and air pollution, as a result causing property values to plummet.

#### Allen: Big Dollars For Small Need

Allen wondered how the state and federal entities could back a \$21.7 million project for an airport that is underused now.

"There's a tremendous credibility gap. Now it's underutilized but they say in 20 years there will be a

need for 150 planes," she said.

And even if there will be a need to accommodate 50 new planes, there are far better ways for the state to spend that kind of money.

"The state can spend \$22 million better for transportation than to help 50 new airplane owners," she said. "You don't spend \$22 million on extensive infrastructure for something that is now underutilized."

Given the amount of funding for such a small need, she said there may be an ulterior plan of which local officials are not aware.

"Our feeling is there's a plan here that is not being honestly reported."

Allen warned the airport may someday be used for freight transportation, for which there is tremendous growth, and warned that Solberg's roughly 730 acres on flat terrain give it the potential for "tremendous potential expansion."

With the infrastructure in place through the massive expansion, the airport would only have to amend its master plan to allow for this lucrative business, she said.

Exacerbating the expansion is the fact that the area surrounding the airport is highly developed, meaning it will encroach upon the

lives of thousands of residents.

#### State: Decision Reached After Balancing Concerns

Branchburg Mayor John Sanford was the first to get the long-awaited news, receiving an April 8 letter from DOT's Division of Aeronautics Deputy Director Emmett O'Hare. He passed the letter along to Allen, who broke the news Monday night.

"The study assessed the condition and adequacy of the existing airports, the current and future operations, and it recommended future facility improvements," wrote O'Hare.

"The airport was evaluated based on the current role in New Jersey's air transportation system, as well as the activity levels and user characteristics projected over the course of a 20-year planning period," he explained.

O'Hare took pains to stress that local concerns came into play.

"In developing the master plan, the consultant took a balanced approach that attempted to address the social, environmental and economic concerns of Readington Township, Branchburg Township and the other surrounding communities, as well as evaluating

the need to safely provide for existing and future aviation activity at the airport," he wrote.

After review by the FAA and the Division of Aeronautics of the DOT, the airport layout plan has been "conditionally approved" pending completion of an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the projects in the master plan.

The DOT will conduct the study to ensure that it is done in an even-handed way, he wrote.

"To prevent any perception that the environmental study may be biased if it is overseen by the airport owners, the state Division of Aeronautics will sponsor the EA, select the consultant and oversee the performance of the work," wrote O'Hare.

The Airport Safety Act of 1983 "seriously eroded the Home Rule Act of 1917," Allen said. "We feel we need to invoke home rule to say that we have a say in whether there should be an expansion of this magnitude."

Though the environmental assessment is the last step before approving the master plan, the mayor said there may be other steps before the airport is given the \$21.7 million to carry out the project. The expansion and renovation project would take four years.