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Readington To Fight Solberg As Replacement Airport

By Emily Colo

A crowd of Readington Township residents, many of them neighbors of Solberg Airport, voiced concern at a township committee meeting Monday about an announcement by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Friday.

The FAA stated that Solberg is one of three airports in the state that could be developed as a replacement for Linden Airport if all federal requirements are met. FAA spokesman Duncan Pardue said Tuesday.

Linden wants to close the municipal airport on Route 1 so that the site can be developed commercially. The city has been required to keep the facility open until the year 2002 because it has accepted federal funding to maintain it.

According to the FAA statement, Linden Airport could be closed sooner than that once an approved

replacement airport is developed and operational.

The Readington residents told the committee they are opposed to Solberg becoming the replacement for Linden and urged the committee to do something to keep the idea from getting off the ground.

The committee assured them the township is already doing a lot to keep such a plan earthbound, and will continue the fight.

Mayor Stephen Mirota said, "We're going to take action. This is not going to happen overnight, and probably never will happen."

Township Attorney William Savo said the township can't file suit on the issue since Linden hasn't taken any action yet.

Savo said, "We're trying to seek a long-term solution since (the Linden issue) could go away and be replaced by another problem" as far as changes to the airport.

Committeewoman Teresa Martin said Tuesday the FAA's stand that Solberg or one of the other airports recommended by Linden's consultants could be developed as a replacement in not a new decision.

She said the FAA has previously said it would allow a replacement if all requirements are met.

Pardue said the FAA's statement Friday that a replacement could be made was based on

review" of a report recently submitted by Trans-Plan Inc., an airport consulting group hired by Linden to come up with recommendations for alternative sites.

Besides Solberg, the firm's recommendations for alternative sites includes Somerset Airport in Bedminster Township and Marlboro Airport in Matawan.

Pardue said the FAA has stipulated that any replacement would have to be "equal to or better than Linden" and that all costs involved in developing the replacement would be Linden's responsibility.

He said it is now up to Linden to choose a site, carry out detailed environmental studies, negotiate with the community and the airport owners, hold public hearings and develop an airport plan. The FAA would then review all data, he said, and decide whether to approve the replacement site.

Pardue said an airport is "a good ratable" for a community and thus would benefit the township economically.

Mrs. Martin said "towns that have gone after ratables don't necessarily have lower tax rates" since the developments create the need for services, such as fire and police protection, which increase the municipal budget.

She said the township is fighting

to keep Solberg from becoming the replacement site by sending its engineer and aviation consultant to meetings between Linden and the FAA.

Mrs. Martin said the township has also joined a suit brought by neighbors of both Solberg and Somerset airports seeking the repeal of a state law that restricts municipal "home rule" zoning authority in areas surrounding airports.

James McKelvey of Readington, one of the plaintiffs said Monday the law is the "vehicle" which allows airports such as Linden to be "moved" without gaining consent of the new host community.

Susan Nagle, one of the owners of Solberg, said "We are in favor of becoming Linden's replacement because it's a source of financing for us." She said the owners have sought to make the same improvements Linden would require—mainly the paving of existing runways—but, without Linden's involvement, would have to seek government funds for the changes.

Mrs. Nagle said that if Solberg becomes Linden's replacement, it would not be an "expansion", but just a "paving" of current runways which would make them safer and more usable. She said the owners don't feel the change would create a lot more plane or car traffic at the airfield.