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Town weighs buying Solberg Airport

Readington plans referendum

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**BY PETER N. SPENCER
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Readington residents will decide whether the township will borrow up to \$22 million to acquire the 726-acre Solberg Airport and its surrounding environs.

The announcement that a petition to allow residents to vote on the issue has enough signatures to trigger a special referendum was made at Monday night's township committee meeting, just before Mayor Gerard Shamey reiterated the township's desire to negotiate a purchase of the airport property in order to prevent any future expansion.

Township officials plan to set a date for the referendum at either the April 3 or 17 township committee meeting, Shamey said.

Borrowing the money would cost an extra \$60 in property taxes for the owner of an average Readington home worth \$400,000, officials estimate.

But many residents are unwilling to add to what they consider an already high tax bill. Others, including township committee candidate Edward Dudzinski, question whether the referendum may be premature -- or even unnecessary -- since the township already has the authority to control the airport's development.

Federal Aviation Administration and state Department of Transportation officials confirmed, via e-mails and letters, "that any airport expansion would specifically be subject to Readington's land-use and zoning requirements," Dudzinski said.

"In other words, there is no pre-emption of local controls on the question of airport expansion," he said in a statement to township officials at Monday night's meeting.

Dudzinski, who has done extensive research on the Solberg Airport, and met with FAA and DOT officials, had another suggestion: Instead of the bond referendum, the township should introduce an ordinance that states the funds would only be available for acquisition of the property through eminent domain, and only if the airport owners file an application to expand the runway beyond its licensed length of 3,735 feet.

The length of the runway seems to be the main sticking point in the on-again, off-again negotiations between the township and airport co- owners Thor Solberg, Lorraine Sol berg and Suzanne Solberg-Nagle. The Solbergs have said they want to be able to lengthen it to 5,000 feet; the township said any expansion of the runway will only pave the way for larger jets, and insists on holding it to the current licensed limit.

Shamey emphasized that firm stance once again at Monday's meeting.

"We will not roll over and play dead, and let this township be subject to something it won't be able to live with," he said.

Shamey also read a letter he posted on the township's Web site urging residents to pass the bond referendum in order to send a message to the airport owners "that the citizens of this township want to resolve this issue in a fair and equitable fashion." He later criticized Thor Solberg for being disingenuous with the public about his plans for expansion.

The mayor also read a letter from Thor Solberg in which the airport co-owner expressed his desire to continue "discussions with members of the committee." The letter, however, did not mention negotiations for the sale of the airport property or its development rights.

And, with both sides so far apart on price, it remains uncertain whether the Solbergs are still willing to sell the property.

The township has offered anywhere from \$9 million to \$20 million for the property; the Solbergs have said they received two appraisals of the property several years ago, both of which valued it at \$40 million or more.

"The airport, I far as I know, is not for sale," Nagle said in a phone interview yesterday.

Later, she added, "If you're going to negotiate with somebody, you have to be open-minded ... We'd like to work something out."

If a deal cannot be consummated, the township has the option of trying to acquire the property through the use of eminent domain. An eminent domain action would require a new ordinance, but would not require a public vote. But the township would have to prove the public necessity of such an action, and that it offered a fair market price for the property, in order for it to stand up in court.

Whatever happens, township officials already have invested a lot of time and money in what has become one of the biggest hot-button issues in the township in decades. According to township records, it has spent over \$130,000 over the last four months in costs specific to the Solberg Airport. This includes legal fees, appraisers, consultants and a public relations firm to help garner public support for the purchase of the property.

"I think (the referendum vote) will really be divided based on how one sees this issue," said Dudzinski, who has taken his own informal survey of residents about the Solberg Airport. "Will they be more concerned with the fundamental right to own property, or with the fear of an airport expansion?"