

TOWNSHIP OF READINGTON

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Office of the Mayor

January 27, 2006

Dear Readington Neighbor,

At its Tuesday, January 17th meeting, the Township Committee updated residents on negotiations regarding the future of Solberg Airport, and the 726 acres of open space surrounding it. The Township is concerned that expansion of the airport and development of the site would compromise the health, safety and welfare of Readington residents and school children, the long-standing open space preservation policies of the Township, as well as its Master Plan goal of maintaining critical natural resources and the Township's rural character.

Requests from members of the public for more information suggested that a thorough briefing would be appropriate. This letter provides an overview of the January 17 briefing; a full transcript is available on the Readington Township Web site at www.readingtontwp.org, as are copies of the various presentations made by consultants retained by the Township.

Township's Position	Solbergs' Position
<p>Solbergs retain airport ownership.</p> <p>Airport size and use remains essentially as it exists today.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety improvements to benefit current aircraft types only. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Maintain main runway at licensed length of 3,735 feet. ○ Retain crosswinds runway at licensed length of 3,440 feet. • Construction of 150,000 sq. ft. of hanger space, increased from 30,000 sq. ft. today. <p>650 Acres of open space preserved.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Township preserves all open space around airport via <i>acquisition</i>. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Protect environment, wildlife, water resources, and quality of life. ○ Recreation uses possible. • Township offers \$22 million <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Majority reimbursed by state grants 	<p>Solbergs retain airport ownership.</p> <p>Airport allowed to develop as a regional business airport handling jets.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fully improved 5000 ft. main runway • Fully improved 3700 ft. crosswinds runway with taxiway • Deed restriction prevents extension of main runway further, to a likely 5,600 feet. • Construction of 500,000 sq. ft. of hanger space. <p>450 acres (est.) of open space preserved.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Township preserves <i>only</i> open space remaining after constructing expansion of runways and hanger space. • Township acquires <i>only development rights</i> to land <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Solbergs retain land, which is preserved by deed restriction. • Solberg asks \$36 million <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Minimal reimbursement by state grants

The Township's Primary Objective: Maintaining Readington's Quality of Life

The future of the airport represents the most important issue our community has faced in many years. The primary objective of this Township Committee is to protect the natural resources and the rural, quiet character of the community in which we live. For many years, a small airport has proved consistent with that character. We respect the Solbergs' history, and we support their desire to continue to operate the airport.

We also acknowledge the airport's unique contribution to the flavor of community. The balloon festival, for example, is a defining event for the Township, and one that many of us look forward to each year. We believe that most people in the Township support the continuation of the airport, and the preservation of the 726 acres of open space, as it exists today.

At the same time, we need to be aware of important developments in the aviation industry that are relevant to the airport's future. Airports to the north and east, namely Teterboro, are experiencing overcrowding. Solberg Airport is listed as a "reliever" in the FAA's National Plan, making expansion plans eligible for federal funding. If the owners of the airport accept federal funding for improvements, there is an FAA preemption of local controls.

Airports are unique facilities, governed largely by federal regulations and priorities, with limited local input on issues such as noise and the types of planes that use the airport. Once the airport improvements are in place to handle larger aircraft, increased utilization is no longer under control of the Township.

Some improvements are appropriate for the continuing safe and efficient operation of Solberg Airport, but others carry the potential to disrupt our way of life and threaten our natural resources, such as the pure water drinking supply that 95% of Readington residents depend upon. Maintaining the right balance depends on the Township's ability to retain its decision making power.

The Significance of Runway Length

The preference of the Township Committee is to maintain the *status quo* at Solberg Airport, both in terms of ownership and operational character, consistent with Readington's own character and priorities. The Township also prefers that improvements in operations and safety should be solely for types of aircraft already served. Essential to maintaining the *status quo* is maintaining the current runway length, which has been the most difficult sticking point in our negotiations.

Once runways reach 4,000 feet, they can accommodate increased jet traffic. The current trend in aviation is toward the increasing use of small-to-medium sized jets using regional jetports that are perceived as convenient alternatives to larger metropolitan hubs.

The existing licensed main runway is presently 3,735 feet, including a 375 foot unpaved turf overrun. The family's initial plan was to expand the main runway from the current paved length of 3,000 feet to 5,600 feet. The plan included paving and lengthening a second "crosswind" runway, which is presently a 3,440 foot turf runway, to 3,700 feet of pavement. During the course of negotiations, the Solbergs held firm on the crosswinds runway, but conceded to limit the main runway length to 5,000 feet, long enough for medium sized business jets.

At the January 17 meeting, the Township's aviation consultant explained that longer runways, in addition to being able to accommodate jets, require a correspondingly larger safety zone for takeoff and landing. When airplanes land, they attempt to touch down at the very beginning of the runway in order to maximize the length of runway available in the event of any problems.

As the enclosed illustration makes clear, the result of these larger safety zones for the proposed runways will be a greater number of descents taking place over neighborhoods near the Airport. Jets and small prop planes will fly very close to residential housing, Holland Brook School and Readington Middle School and the Hillcrest Park recreation area. The Township Committee is very concerned about this.

The Significance of Hangar Size

The Solbergs also initially requested 1 million square feet of hangar space. That is enough to garage 100 small jets, and twice the hangar space at Morristown Airport. In the course of negotiations, the Solbergs countered with 500,000 square feet — still fully the amount available at Morristown. The Township's concern is that development of this magnitude would provoke a wholesale change in the nature of operations, and would certainly compromise the site's unique open spaces values.

In considering this issue, the Township recognized that airports generate their revenue from the leasing of space in hangars, in addition to revenues from selling fuel and other services. Taking this into consideration, the Township suggested 150,000 square feet of hanger space rather than the 30,000 square feet there today. The Township's position was meant to recognize that some additional space could provide for incremental growth in the airport's business, but that this growth could be accomplished without destroying the existing character of the airport and open space values of the site.

Differences on Open Space Preservation

The issues of airport expansion and open space preservation are closely linked. As noted in the summary table at the beginning of this letter, airport expansion, including construction of hundreds of thousands of square feet of hanger space, results in a reduction of open space preserved and the quality of that open space.

In the Solbergs' proposal, much of the open space to be preserved would consist of fragmented parcels of little use to the expanded airport. Taking the proposed increase in airport operations, if such were implemented, would severely compromise open space qualities, diminish residents' quality of life, and threaten the educational process as well as the health and safety of school children and all residents.

As noted in the table above, the Solbergs wish to sell *only the development rights* of the residual land, retaining control over the open space and public access. This is not consistent with the Township's open space goals, which include recreational opportunities. The \$36 million price they are asking for the development easements is estimated to be far greater than would ever be reimbursed by the State's Open Space Preservation grants. The Township Committee is very concerned about this, because of its obligation to the Township's taxpayers.

Jet Aircraft Noise

At the January 17th meeting, the Township's noise consultant described the remarkable quiet of our area. Noise levels are very low in Readington, even with an airport in the community. The consultant assured us that with an expansion of the scale proposed by Solberg Aviation, the community would definitely notice an increase in noise. Regardless of their size, flight paths, or new technology implemented in an effort to mitigate the additional noise, jet aircraft would be seen and heard throughout the community. The increase in noise levels would, as the Township's consultant indicated, make Readington "a very different place." We on the Township Committee believe our community should not have to make that kind of transition.

Tax Revenues and Property Values

Presently, Solberg Airport represents \$40,000 in annual taxes to the Township. This amount would increase proportionately following any expansion. However, the potential for incrementally higher revenues from the airport must be weighed against possible declines in property values for other residents.

Some newspaper reports have cited a figure of \$1 million as a possible amount the Airport might generate for the Township annually. The basis for this figure remains unclear, and has not been made known by these newspaper reports or Solberg Aviation, which suggest proposed payments twenty-five times greater than what is currently paid. The growth that Solberg Airport would have to experience in order to generate such a tremendous ratable increase is well beyond anything the Township Committee wishes to contemplate.

Where Do We Go From Here?

After much consideration, and with the input of the Township's consultants, the Township Committee concluded that going beyond the 3,735-foot threshold would irrevocably jeopardize not only the character of Readington Township, but also the residents, the schools, and the open space values of the site. The Township remains firmly committed to keeping the main runway at its currently approved maximum length of 3,735 feet. In addition, concerns over the proximity of Holland Brook School and Readington Middle School to the end of the crosswind runway have caused the Township to conclude that the crosswind runway should not be expanded and paved.

After the unfortunate termination of discussions on January 2nd, the Solberg family has indicated some willingness to resume discussion on the most desirable outcome on these issues, as well as the ultimate disposition of the airport. Contrary to a small number of news reports, the Township Committee has never walked away from these discussions, and remains committed to pursuing them as far as practicable. However, our greatest obligation is to maintaining the character of our community, which is the foundation of our civic reputation, property values, and quality of life.

The Township Committee is making every effort to provide information to the community in a manner that is as accurate and complete as possible. Your active engagement in these important issues is much appreciated. Do not hesitate to contact me, Township Committeeman Frank Gatti, who is heading the Township's negotiating committee, or another member of the Township Committee with your thoughts, questions or concerns.

We invite you to register at the Readington Township Web site at <http://www.readingtontwp.org> for notices of updates as they occur.

Sincerely,

Gerard Shamey
Mayor
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