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## Readington school board targets airport

Panel claims Solberg expansion would endanger students, others

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**BY JENNIFER WEISS**  
Star-Ledger Staff

The Readington Board of Education recently passed a resolution opposing the expansion of Solberg Airport, just three weeks before a referendum on the \$22 million bond that township officials propose using to acquire or preserve the airport and surrounding lands.

Holland Brook School and Readington Middle School would be on the flight path of aircraft flying at an altitude of "well under 1,000 feet" if Solberg Airport were to expand, the resolution states.

Aircraft landing on an expanded crosswind runway, the smaller of the airport's two runways, "would pose a perpetual and imminent safety threat to the children, staff and visitors" at both schools, the resolution states.

And noise from aircraft "would be a distraction to effective teaching and learning" at Holland Brook School, Readington Middle School and Three Bridges School, according to the resolution.

"We got involved because of the fact that there's an issue with safety, number one," James Sheerin, interim superintendent of Readington's school district, said yesterday. "The possible expansion of the runways, which could accommodate larger aircraft, could endanger children because they would be in the glide path of the aircraft."

Using a sheet titled "Safety Zone for Solberg Airport Expansion Plan," which was available yesterday outside the board of education offices and at the municipal building, Sheerin pointed out the proximity of an orange line defining the boundaries of a "safety zone" around an expanded airport to the Holland Brook and Readington Middle schools. On the sheet, the line touches Holland Brook School.

Sheerin said a board member had drafted a resolution opposing airport expansion prior to the board's April 25 meeting. Board members reviewed and adopted the resolution after Readington Mayor Gerard Shamey spoke informally about the airport, Sheerin said.

Asked if there was any connection between the resolution and the school budget, which was defeated and

now must be reviewed by the township committee, Sheerin said, "It's two separate issues."

"Quite frankly, the board has acted in a very responsible way," Sheerin said. Members' decision to pass the resolution "was not a conclusion that just came up out of the blue," he said, noting that the issue has been present in the community for years.

Thor Solberg, a co-owner of the airport with his sisters, Lorraine Solberg and Suzanne Solberg Nagle, said yesterday the school board's resolution was "alarming, because their facts are all wrong."

"They're basing conclusions on this information, and it's kind of disappointing that they wouldn't even contact us to find out if there was even an expansion plan, or if there wasn't," Thor Solberg said. "For them to be scaring parents based on something that isn't true is very disappointing."

Solberg said he found out about the resolution through a parent.

On the "Safety Zone for Solberg Airport Expansion Plan" sheet, the airport's main runway, now 3,735 feet long, is illustrated at an expanded length of 5,000 feet. The airport's smaller, unpaved crosswind runway is listed at an expanded length of 3,700 feet. The lengths are listed as "proposed" lengths.

While they have not disputed that a runway length of 5,000 feet came up during their series of closed negotiations with township officials, which ended several months ago, the Solbergs have characterized the length as a limit rather than a proposal.

The airport's master plan, which federal and state agencies conditionally approved in 1999, includes a proposal to lengthen the primary runway and pave the crosswind runway.

Still, the 5,000-foot length is being used by township officials now because it is "politically expedient for them," Thor Solberg said.

"They've created the impression that there's an expansion in process that doesn't exist," he said. "It's phantom. And not only have they created a mythical improvement to this facility, but they've also attributed adverse impacts to that, which the school board has picked up here."

A public vote on the proposed \$22 million bond is scheduled for Tuesday, May 16.

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