

TOWNSHIP OF READINGTON
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JUERGEN HUELSEBUSCH
MAYOR

June 8, 2023

Diane Gutierrez-Scaccetti
NJ Commissioner of Transportation
Mail Code 401-07
401 East State Street
P.O. Box 402
Trenton, NJ 08625-0420

Dear Commissioner Gutierrez-Scaccetti:

I am the Mayor of the Township of Readington, Hunterdon County ("Township"), the home to Solberg Airport ("Airport"). My purpose is to communicate to you concerns and suggestions by Readington Township with respect to the Airport Master Plan process for which the Airport has received a grant, and, as we understand, is in the process of preparing. Because of the inevitable impacts Airport operations have upon the Township and its residents, we are seeking the opportunity to be involved in the Airport Master Plan process.

So that you to have a full understanding of the Township's concerns and suggestions, I have provided some background information with respect to the history of the relationship between the Airport and the Township; information about recommendations contained in Solberg's previous attempt to amend its Airport Master Plan; and the Township's goals with respect to the development of the Airport. We think this information is vital to the proper development of an Airport Master Plan. Finally, because the Township and its residents are so vitally affected by the Airport operations, the Township respectfully requests that it be intimately involved in the development of the proposed Airport Master Plan.

I. Solberg Airport.

The Airport is located in the heart of Readington Township in a very rural area surrounded by residences accessed by narrow roads. The property is more than 700+ acres in total, of which approximately 110 acres is devoted to airport operations consisting of one main paved runway and several related structures. The remainder of the property is currently largely devoted to farming. It is the understanding of the Township that airport use has decreased significantly over the last few years.

Because of narrow bridges and roads and environmental issues, access to the site is substantially restricted. No expansion of airport operations could be accomplished without significant disruption to the quality of the lives of nearby residents, considering increased truck traffic, truck and airplane

noise, and the many other detrimental environmental impacts which would result.

Some years ago, the State sought to purchase the Airport and all the surrounding property for a very substantial sum. The goal of the State at that time, as it assured the Township in writing, was to continue to operate the Airport in its current configuration, and to preserve the remaining portion of the property as open space. Unfortunately, the owners of the Airport turned down this very generous offer.

II. Solberg's Prior Attempt to Develop an Airport Master Plan and the State's Analysis of that Proposal.

In 1997, Solberg prepared an earlier draft of an Airport Master Plan. A preliminary study of that proposed plan by Clough Harbor Associates, the experts hired by the State to review it, recommended development on the property be limited to the runway lengths already in existence ("Clough Harbor Study"). Specifically, the Clough Harbor Study focused on three alternatives, none of which increased the primary runway beyond its licensed length of 3,735 feet: (1) a "no build" alternative in which the airport's configuration would not change; (2) a "modified no build" alternative in which the entire 3,735-foot approved length of the primary runway would be paved with limited improvements to increase safety; and (3) a "runway improvement" alternative in which a new runway of 3,735 feet would be constructed. Each of these three alternatives could be accommodated within the approximate 110 acres currently used for airport operations. Rather than approve the Solberg Plan, the study by the State's expert stated: "the Master Plan airfield recommendations are not being considered for implementation" and, instead, "a substantially scaled back option was developed for analysis ..."

III. The Township Policies Regarding the Airport.

The Township has long-held concerns about detrimental impacts to its rural character and the quality of life of its residents caused by incompatible development, including the Airport expansion. After careful thought, and public input, it developed clear land-use and other policies applicable to both the Airport and the overall 700+ acres on which it is located. These policies are aimed at reducing controversy between it and the Airport. To achieve a more harmonious relationship, the Township has clarified it supports continued operation of the Airport within its existing approximately 110-acre site along with the development of any necessary safety improvements. To comply with the requirement of the Municipal Land Use law and to apply the conclusions of the Clough Harbor study, it asked the Planning Board to evaluate future land-use goals for the entire 700+ acre site,, as well as airport operations, and to consider the recommendations of the Clough Harbor study. The Board amended the Township Master Plan goals for the Airport as follows:

Maintenance and development of Solberg-Hunterdon Airport should be substantially consistent with the configuration and facilities as identified in the February 2020 NJDOT memo and as recommended in the 2002 draft Environmental Assessment.

The 2002 Environmental Assessment (the Clough Harbor Study) articulated an airport configuration to address deficiencies in the facilities, with respect to FAA

standards, to maximize safety and to accommodate future needs. The 2002 EA's recommended configuration is substantially consistent with the NJDOT licensed runway configuration identified in 2020. Known as the "Runway Improvement Alternative," it identified the following configuration:

"A new primary runway located approximately 240 feet northwest of, and parallel to, Runway 4-22 should be constructed. This runway designation should be Runway 3-21 and consist of a length of 3,735 feet and width of 75 feet. Existing Runway 4-22 should be converted to a full-length parallel taxiway and reduced from 50 to 35 feet in width. Turf Runway 10-28 should be closed."

Airport Safety Zones should be maintained pursuant to the "Air Safety and Zoning Act of 1983," P.L. 1983, chapter 260, and the provisions of N.J.A.C. 16:62, "Air Safety and Zoning. To that end, the Township Committee adopted an ordinance consistent with these regulations on June 15, 2020.

The Township should ensure that any site development at the airport follows the procedures and regulations contained within the Township's Chapter 148 Land Development.

Consistent with the Township's goal of supporting safety improvements, when the Airport sought to extend pavement to a grass section of its primary runway, the matter was considered by the Planning Board and approval was granted after an expert hired by the Township concluded that the paving would enhance safe operations. The approval was consistent with both the Township's and the Master Plan goals.

IV. Recommendations

The Township wants to work cooperatively with the Airport and the Department of Transportation so that there is a fair evaluation of the proposed Airport Master Plan. To that end, it suggests the following:

1. To allow the Township and its residents to have all necessary information about the process, it requests you request the Airport to copy the Township Clerk and myself on all communications to the Department. The Township will commit to sending to the Airport copies of all communications it sends the Department.
2. The Department copies the Township Clerk and me on all communications it issues with respect to the development of the Airport Master Plan.
3. Regular meetings are scheduled between the Township and the Department to keep the Township up to date on developments pertaining to the draft Airport Master Plan.
4. The Department considers engaging an independent airport expert, like Clough Harbor Associates, to evaluate any Airport Master Plan proposed by the Airport.

Adopting an open and fair process as suggested will grant the public a greater measure of trust in the system and will accomplish the regulatory requirements that stakeholders be openly consulted about the process. We look forward to your response and to working with you and the Airport to develop an Airport Master Plan that protects current airport operations but shields the Township and its residents of any substantial expansion or alteration of the scope of current operations.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Very truly yours

Juergen Huelsebusch
Mayor, Readington Township

RPC/pmh

CC:

The Township Committee of Readington
Richard Sheola, Township Administrator
Sharon Dragan, Esq.
Richard Cushing, Esq.