

WHY THE CONCERN NOW?

Solberg Airport is participating in process that may leading to DOT approval of a jetport.

Solberg Aviation held a “Public Informational Meeting” on December 6th 2023, at which time, Solberg Aviation announced it is in the process of updating its Airport Master Plan. This is the first step in a process necessary to expand their present small General Aviation Airport into an “Advanced Service Airport” designed to **accommodate mid-sized jet traffic for corporate, charter, or cargo uses**, and could be similar in size to Morristown Airport.

This airport has been the subject of much controversy for many decades. Solberg Hunterdon Airport sits on a **740-acre tract of land, larger than the size of La Guardia Airport**. In the late 1960’s, because of its size and strategic location in Central New Jersey, the airport was being considered for the fourth Jetport for the NY metropolitan Area. 25 years ago, in 1999, Solberg Airport obtained conditional Department of Transportation (DOT) approval for an expansion into a jetport for mid-sized jets. *Both plans were squashed by local public opposition.*

HOW IS SUCH AN EXPANSION POSSIBLE? THERE IS A TWO-FOLD ANSWER:

First, government money can be used to enrich a private landowner. Large amounts of Federal Grant money are available to privately owned airports through the NJ “Airport Improvement Program”. Solberg is a privately owned, public use airport. Money to improve their airport is available so long as they assure public use for 20 years. Based on past plans, it is reasonable to expect that Solberg Aviation will ask for **about \$40 million in grants** to build a longer, wider, and stronger main runway to service larger jets. This would pay for the construction of a mile long main runway (5,600 foot), the paving and lengthening of the crosswind runway, 500,000 square feet of new hanger space, and a new terminal building.

Last year the NJDOT provided a grant for the development of the Airport Master Plan. FAA Guidelines recommend that the airport owner include stakeholders in the planning process, namely local government officials, surrounding property owners, concerned citizen groups, and local School board officials. **To date, these stakeholders have not been invited to participate.** It is very likely the public will not be given any information on the plan before it is completed.

Second, a Solberg expansion plan must receive full approval of the NJDOT. The Division of Aeronautics’ goal is to improve the State’s Airport Infrastructure and, where possible, enlarge its capacity to meet future demand. The 2022 State Aviation System Plan, (SASP) the State’s most recently approved planning document, designates Solberg as a “Priority General Service Airport”. It is found in the Division of Aeronautics website. See page four of this plan where it states; “The SASP recommends that any airport included in the Priority General Service functional level

be developed to the fullest extent possible in efforts to comply with the Advanced Service functional level.” Morristown, Teterboro and Essex County Airports are examples of Advanced Service Level Airports. The likelihood of an expansion increases when the goals of the airport owners and NJDOT line up.

WHY IS AIRPORT EXPANSION A REASON FOR CONCERN?

Most Readington and Branchburg **residents live within a five-mile radius of Solberg Airport**. An expanded airport will lower property values and degrade the quality of life for all our residents. Traffic on local roads would be increased. Noise from low flying jets, landing and taking off, would affect their wellbeing. The expansion would negatively affect the historic village of Readington and would degrade the environment by significantly adding to air and water pollution. For many decades, both Readington Township and Branchburg have made a priority of protecting the wonderful rural character and the enviable quality of life of our neighborhoods. An expanded airport would diminish that quality of life.

The 740-acre Solberg Aviation tract is a direct neighbor of Readington Schools. The current Airport Hazard and Safety Zone already extends over Hillcrest Park, over nearby neighborhoods and onto the property of Holland Brook School. The lengthening of runways would further extend these zones. An increase in noise, pollution, and traffic would deprive residents of the peaceful enjoyment of their property. These effects are magnified, when one considers the safety and health concerns for our children at Readington’s two largest schools and at Hillcrest Park.

WHAT CAN CITIZENS DO TO STOP AN EXPANSION?

- ***Make DOT aware of local opposition as early in this process as possible, with the goal of convincing the Division of Aeronautics not to approve a large expansion plan.*** As we have said, local opposition has derailed two prior major expansion plans. It is important to deliver this message loudly and clearly. This may be made difficult by the possibility that Solberg Aviation and their private consultant may send the plan they develop directly to the DOT for approval before it has been shared with the public.
- ***Appeal to elected officials for assistance.*** Ask for their help in communicating the existence of local opposition to the Director of the Division of Aeronautics, and to the Commissioner of Transportation. This would include Township Committee members, County Commissioners, State Assemblymen, and our State Senator. Communicate opposition directly to elected officials both via email and/or regular mail, and via attendance at meetings.

- ***Spread the word.*** The more residents that understand the seriousness of this threat to our community, and take some action, the louder and more determined the citizens are perceived.

WHAT ARE THE CHANCES OF STOPPING A PLANNED EXPANSION?

Under the municipal land use law, a host municipality has zoning authority over airport improvements and construction. Readington's Master Plan and zoning don't support Airport expansion and the town can deny its application. Although the Commissioner of Transportation has the "ultimate authority" over airport improvements, and a denial can be overruled by the Commissioner, case law shows that municipalities very often win a court challenge against the State when they have been overridden. The Commissioner cannot ignore legitimate local zoning and planning, and most importantly, he must prove a need for expansion, knowing that General Aviation activity in NJ, as measured by "operations per year", is half what it was 20 years ago.

DOT must be made aware of the opposition to the airport expansion.