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SF veto threat over Kesh site

Andersonstown News

By Damian McCarney

24/04/2007

Sinn Féin will veto plans to build a stadium at the former Long Kesh prison site unless there is agreement on opening up part of the jail to the public as a major visitor attraction.

The vast expanse of disused land at the prison site has been touted by Lisburn councillors as the best location for a 'national' stadium to house football, rugby and GAA matches.

However, Sinn Féin MLAs Paul Butler and Raymond McCartney, who sit on the monitoring group that oversee the development of the former prison, insist that the plans to build the stadium will not receive the green light until there is agreement on opening up the jail as a visitor attraction.

Their plans for the Long Kesh site, which was the scene of the 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes, include a conflict resolution centre housed in an iconic building, built to the highest international standards.

Mr Butler, who is vice chair of the monitoring group, said he was concerned that the focus has been solely on building a stadium.

"No stadium can be built without agreement on developing the prison buildings as a visitor attraction, similar to Kilmainham Jail in Dublin and Robben Island in South Africa.

"Both the stadium and the preserved prison buildings projects are joined at the hip, if you like, and must proceed simultaneously," said Paul Butler.

"Sinn Féin and the DUP must agree both proposals or else plans for a stadium will not proceed," agreed Raymond McCartney, who took part in the 1980 hunger strike.

"There has been much debate recently over the proposals to have a stadium located at Long Kesh.

"However, what has to be pointed out in all of this is that this site is of huge historical importance in the conflict here over the last 30 years.

"The reality is that Long Kesh is unique in terms of international prison history and it has the strongest community links of any prison in the world. It is essential therefore that part of the jail be preserved," added Raymond.

"Those in support of the stadium at Long Kesh should also support the setting up of a conflict resolution campus and visitors' centre.

"We want to see these proposals being given as equal an importance as any plans to have a stadium built there."

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