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Dispute over future of H-Block site

Sunday, June 24, 2007 - By Colm Heatley in Belfast

It was supposed to be a symbol of hope and reconciliation, but plans for a 'national stadium' on the site of the former H-Block prison in the North have come unstuck amid a wave of allegations about misuse of resources and "shrines to terrorism".

From the outset the proposal to build a sports stadium and a reconciliation centre has been controversial, but last week a University of Ulster report found the government would, in effect, be handing over land worth more than stg£500 million to private developers for free.

At a time of increased financial responsibility for the North, the handover of such a huge asset, suggested the report, would be unwise.

Furthermore, the University of Ulster report suggested a better site for the stadium would be in Belfast.

A stadium in the city, said the report, would be more likely to feed into the tourist industry, while the vast swathe of land occupied by the Maze Prison could be used more effectively for housing.

This tug-of-war between Belfast and Lisburn for a key tourist attraction and 365 acres of prime real estate is at the heart of the dispute.

By the end of last week the report had caused ructions within the DUP, leading to a public falling out among some of its most senior members, and it later emerged that - despite the advanced scale of the stadium plan and its scale - no business plans had been handed in.

The Stormont Culture Minister, Edwin Poots of the DUP, who sat on the original committee which approved the Maze site for redevelopment in 2005, is adamant that it is the right choice.

His party colleagues - notably Nigel Dodds - are equally adamant the site should be in Belfast, not only for tourism reasons, but because the stadium site, which would preserve the prison hospital where the hunger strikers died, would become a "shrine to terrorism".

However, Dodds, whose north Belfast constituency would be one of the areas in contention for the stadium, may have other, more pragmatic motives.

Facing mounting opposition to his plan, Poots gave those backing the Belfast site until the end of the month to hand in their proposals.

Belfast city council insiders told The Sunday Business Post that they would simply ignore Poots's deadline.

"He has no right to impose such a tight deadline, and we won't be adhering to it, it is unfair and unjust, especially when the fact that no business plans have been handed into Peter Robinson [the North's finance minister]," said the council insider.

"There are a number of potential sites in Belfast that are much better suited to a major stadium and we want those to be considered also."

Around two-thirds of a sports stadium's revenue are generated by one-off events such as concerts, and those backing Belfast say that putting such a venue in a rural location is economic folly.



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