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By Steven McCaffery
Tuesday, 14 October 2008

Northern Ireland's Culture Minister has given the clearest indication yet that proposals for a multi-sports stadium at the Maze prison site may be scrapped.

Gregory Campbell yesterday confirmed he had finalised long-awaited recommendations on the project and was ready to brief fellow ministers.

But the minister said in the Assembly that he had asked the representatives of soccer, rugby and gaelic games to identify their preferred 'plan B', if proposals for a joint stadium were ditched.

The Maze and its H-block were synonymous with the Troubles and it was originally hoped that a positive message for the future could be sent out by building a stadium at the site to be shared by sports from the nationalist and unionist traditions.

But unionists raised concerns over costs and claims that a museum

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holding sections of the prison would become a republican shrine.

What are these?

During ministerial questions in the Assembly yesterday Mr Campbell was asked by party colleague Jim Shannon if the three sports bodies, who had originally backed the stadium plan, had been made aware of the alternatives to a joint venue at the Maze.

Mr Campbell said: "I said to each of them that I knew what their previous position was, and I then alluded to them, 'Is that still your same position?'

"And then asked them, 'If we were talking then, for whatever reason, hypothetically, if your previous position is not going to be the final outcome, what would your preferred solution be?' Now as a result of those discussions... I am now in the position where I am able to furnish my Executive colleagues with a paper which should end the uncertainty."

Republicans have noted that sections of the Maze prison have already been listed for protection, including one of its iconic H-blocks and the prison hospital where republican hunger strikers including Bobby Sands died in 1981. Sinn Fein MLA for Lagan Valley, Paul Butler, said his party would block any plans to build a stadium away from the Maze/Long Kesh site.

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