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Stadium at Maze ruled out

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SIMON FINN in Belfast

IT REMAINED unclear last night when DUP Minister for Sport Gregory Campbell will officially explain his decision to shelve plans to build a sports stadium at the Maze prison site near Lisburn.

Mr Campbell's decision, which has annoyed and disappointed a wide range of politicians and sporting interests, including his DUP colleague Jeffrey Donaldson, was not raised at yesterday's meeting of the Northern Executive.

His department said yesterday that he could not comment on the decision until an explanatory paper he had circulated was considered by his Executive colleagues. Potentially this could take two or more weeks.

The new stadium was to have had a capacity of 38,500 and would have cost £300 million (€319 million). It was supported by the governing bodies of football, rugby and GAA. An associated proposal involved one of the so-called H-blocks being developed into a conflict resolution centre, although this plan has been opposed by some unionists who characterised it as a "shrine" to the republican hunger strikers.

The lack of any agreement between Sinn Féin and the DUP over the redevelopment of the Maze site was one of the factors behind the deadlock which prevented the Stormont Executive from meeting for 152 days last year.

It is understood that proposals will now be examined which would allow the North's football, rugby and GAA stadiums to be separately upgraded.

Mike Bull, a coach from Bangor, Co Down, called the decision "a sad reflection on our sporting ethos", but Northern Ireland football supporters' spokesman Gary McAllister said most fans would support the decision.

SDLP deputy leader Alasdair McDonnell said it would be unforgivable if a project with the potential to generate 10,000 new jobs was abandoned.

Sinn Féin spokesman Barry McElduff said rugby, football and GAA would all suffer, as would the North's ability to stage events during the 2012 London Olympics.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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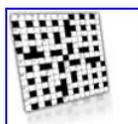
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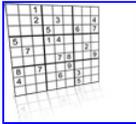
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