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H-block to stay regardless of stadium decision — Poots

(Margaret Canning, [Irish News](#))

The former Maze prison site will be retain a link with the deaths of the Hunger Strikers whether or not a sports stadium is built there, culture, arts and leisure minister Edwin Poots has insisted.

Mr Poots was dismissing criticism of plans to use the site for a 35,000-seater stadium by his DUP colleague Nigel Dodds, the enterprise, trade and investment minister.

In a surprise split among senior party figures, Mr Dodds has said the site near Lisburn would not be acceptable to unionists if plans for a 'conflict transformation centre' went ahead retaining one of the H-blocks.

However, Mr Poots has responded by saying the H-blocks are listed buildings (H-block One and the prison hospital have been listed) and would remain on the site regardless of other development.

"If people don't want any development at the Maze, these maintained structures will still be there, irrespective of whether there is a stadium developed there," he told the BBC.

"There is a far greater potential for a shrine to be developed if that's the only thing left on the site," the Lagan Valley assembly member said.

Mr Dodds, who said he was speaking in a personal capacity, had claimed the preservation of a section of the H-blocks including the hospital wing "would become a shrine to the terrorists who committed suicide in the Maze in the 1980s".

"That would be obnoxious to the vast majority of people and is something unionist people cannot accept."

Opponents of the plans for a stadium for rugby, soccer, GAA and other sports on the Maze site say it should be built instead in Belfast city centre.

Mr Poots has challenged supporters of a Belfast stadium to

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come up with firm, costed plans by the end of this month.

DUP leader and first minister Ian Paisley last week ruled out plans for a stadium at Ormeau Park in south Belfast.

A DUP spokesman last night (Sunday) said he "would not be drawn" on whether the divergent views of Mr Poots and Mr Dodds had embarrassed the party.

Sinn Féin assembly member Barry McElduff, chairman of the assembly's culture, arts and leisure committee, said a centre for conflict transformation was "joined at the hip" to the plans for a sports stadium at the Maze.

"Speaking personally, and not as a chairman of the committee, the Maze/ Long Kesh site is of huge importance to very many people, including Irish republicans, and anyone who is interested in recent history in Ireland," Mr McElduff said.

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