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Row over hunger strike film

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Councillors clash over bid to use property in Bobby Sands movie

Thursday, November 01, 2007

By Victoria O'Hara

A political row is expected to erupt tonight over the proposed use of Belfast City Council property to shoot a film about the era of the IRA hunger strikes.

The Channel Four/Blast Films co-production is set during the 1980-81 period and is based on the last six weeks of Bobby Sands' life.

The film - called Hunger - is co-written by former Turner Prize winner Steve McQueen and award-winning Irish screenwriter and playwright Enda Walsh.

The company had requested permission for a scene to be shot in Belfast City Council's Wilmot House - which is an historic property located at south Belfast's Lady Dixon Park.

It is understood the scene involves a prison officer visiting his mother in a fictional nursing home and being shot dead.

The company told the council the story would be portrayed in an unbiased, sensitive manner, favouring no political opinion.

However, the council's Parks and Leisure Committee last month turned down the request for a one-day shoot.

But Sinn Fein is set to voice support for the project and will attempt to get full council backing tonight.

DUP councillor Robin Newton, a member of the Parks and Leisure Committee, said some members are "opposed to trawling up past events to no positive conclusion".

"I wish to ask all my colleagues on the council to let sleeping dogs lie, as we don't need to reopen old wounds on the decades of the Troubles," he said.

"Allowing this filming to take place in council property will send out the wrong signals altogether."

Speaking ahead of the meeting, Mr Newton appealed to Sinn Fein to "err on the side of moderation and do not support this bid to dig up past woes".

However, Paul Maskey, Sinn Fein's group leader on the council, said the party will raise the matter and ask for a decision to be deferred.

"We will be raising this at the full council meeting and asking for more information about the project," he said.

"I think this is very important such films are made.

"This is history. We are crying out for the film industry to come to Belfast, and yet we could take a decision to refuse a film being made about Belfast and the history of the north of Ireland."

Mr Maskey added: "If that is the case then it would be a shame for Belfast City Council to do that.

"There is also a lot of finance and money and jobs to be created through the film industry.

"We need to be encouraging that industry in Northern Ireland."

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