



SCHOOL'S OUT...OR IN

Ahead of tonight's crucial rezoning vote which could pave the way for a new gael scoil on Cork's northside, the two sides in this long-running and bitter debate put their case to **Eoin English**

A SPORTS field on Cork's northside is the most suitable location for a new gael scoil, the Department of Education insisted last night.

The department was responding, ahead of tonight's crucial rezoning vote at Cork City Council, to claims from opponents to the controversial Gael scoil an Ghoirt Aláinn project that it hasn't considered all the alternative options.

As intense last-minute lobbying of councillors stepped up, the Save the Tank Field campaigners posted documents to their website, released under Freedom of Information, which apparently show the department failed to properly consider an offer of a site from Mayfield GAA first made in October 2007.

The club restated its offer last February but the department only ruled it out weeks later.

Opponents fighting to save the public open space said the documents prove that the department has not properly considered alternative sites.

But in a statement, the department said it did consider the Mayfield GAA club site and insisted that the Tank Field is the most suitable location for the new school building.

"The department considered a number of accommodation options in relation to a permanent solution for the school and concluded that the current proposed site, for which a planning application has been submitted, was the most suitable," a spokesperson said.

The protracted battle over plans to build the new school comes to a head tonight.

Campaigners on both sides are expected to pack the public galleries in City Hall this evening to watch councillors decide the fate of the proposed new school, and the future of the Tank Field.

They are set to vote on a proposed Material Contravention of the City Development Plan which is needed to allow the department proceed with plans to build a new 16-classroom school for the gael scoil on a two-acre

portion of the 11.8-acre sports field. But while some councillors have publicly declared their support for the gael scoil, the school's supporters are unlikely to secure the required two-thirds majority needed to sanction the rezoning.

The department said it will await the outcome of tonight's vote before deciding on a possible appeal to An Bord Pleanála.

The project has been mired in controversy for almost five years. The school, founded in 1993, has been based in prefabs in the overflow car park of Brian Dillon's GAA club, right next to the Tank Field, since 1998.

In 2007, the department lodged a planning application with Cork City Council for a new 16-classroom school on a portion of the Tank Field.

Council planners gave the project the green light, subject to city councillors voting two-thirds in favour of rezoning.

Councillors voted 15 to 13 in favour — not enough to secure the rezoning.

The department appealed the decision to An Bord Pleanála which overturned the council's decision, and granted planning permission.

But problems with the planning application emerged when it was discovered that overhead cables which run across part of the site were omitted from planning documents.

It was discovered that if the project went ahead as planned, a realigned pitch for Brian Dillon's Club would be located under the power cables.

In November 2009, former city manager, Joe Gavin, ordered a review of the project which confirmed that the department would need to lodge a new planning application.

The move sparked another wave of opposition which has intensified in recent months. Campaigners argue a new school is needed to cater for growing demand, and to replace ageing and unsuitable facilities.

The Parents and Teachers Action Group said alternative sites have been examined, but deemed unsuitable; the

proposed site requires just two acres of the 11.8-acre Tank Field; the two GAA pitches on the site will be retained; low railings will be installed around the pitches and public access will be maintained; and there will be a number of entrance points around the remaining 9.8-acres allowing for better walking conditions.

But opponents have urged the authorities to save the Tank Field.

They fear the amenity will be lost to public use, and have warned that rezoning sports grounds could set a dangerous precedent for other public open spaces across the city.

The department said it must await the outcome of tonight's vote before funding issues can be considered.

"When the planning stage has been completed and statutory approvals obtained, the further progression of the project will be considered, in the context of the department's multi-annual School Building and Modernisation Programme," a spokesperson said.

'It could play an active role as a resource to community'

GAELSCOIL an Ghoirt Álainn, founded almost 20 years ago, will open its doors in September to the greatest number of pupils it has seen since its foundation.

The demand for the school has grown steadily each year and anyone who has any link to the school can understand why this year we will welcome 50 new junior infants.

The school is a co-educational, multi-denominational gaelscoil that prides itself on principles of democracy, equality and human rights.

Our school is the only gaelscoil in the country attached to Educate Together offering parents on the north-east of Cork city choice on more than one level.

With 80% of the pupils living within 1.5 miles of the school, there is little doubt that the success of the school has been driven by community effort.

Of the 376 submissions on file with the city planners, approximately 70% favour the proposed development.

On March 26 last, a crowd of some 1,500 people stopped traffic in Cork city to highlight the need for a permanent building for the school.

Members of the school community work tirelessly to create a positive learning environment and, despite difficulties, parents are happy to see their children receive a wonderful education.

The city councillors of Cork have a chance to address the problems of teaching in prefabs and can make a genuine impact.

The school suffers from cramped conditions, inadequate toilet facilities, insulation problems, the lack of a proper schoolyard and hall to name but a few.

The school is asking councillors to agree with a decision by Bord Pleanála to allow for a school building. The site required is two acres of an 11.8-acre site where a 2.3-acre site had previously been granted permission.

The proposed development of the remaining land has plans for a railing with specific access points allowing for full access.

There are two GAA pitches now and there will be two GAA pitches if the development goes ahead.

It has been a long journey for all attached to the gaelscoil while sites have been investigated and turned down by the Department of Education over the years.

The addition of a school building to the area where it has been located since 1998 would create a public amenity unlike any other.

The school could play a very active role as

a genuine resource to the community, opening its doors for a variety of uses including public meetings, evening classes, a venue for sports days, summer camps and much more.

Education is progression.

'This is about loss to the public of entire Tank Field'

THE proposal to re-zone the Tank Field and build on it is not just a local issue for the north-east of Cork city.

It has much wider implications for public open spaces throughout the city and for planning in the city generally.

The senior executive planner in the city council, in recommending refusal of permission for the school building there, described the Tank Field as "a highly valued, accessible, level, well used open space/sports ground which is used by a wide cross section of the community".

It is the only such public open space in the north-east of the city, an area identified in the City Development Plan as one which already has a shortage of such spaces.

More public, open spaces are needed in the city, not less. Giving planning permission for the Tank Field would mean that this public park in its entirety would be lost as a public amenity.

This is not just about the site for the school, which would be in one of the most used locations and most intrusive on the surrounding houses.

It is about loss to the public of the entire Tank Field.

In an agreement put together by officials in the Department of Education, Brian Dillons GAA club, and the city council, and approved in 2005/6, once planning permission is

given, the site

for the gaelscoil would be sold to the department and the rest of the Tank Field would be transferred to Brian Dillons on a lease of 99 years.

The Tank Field would, in effect, become private property and useless to local kids as an amenity as a result. Arguably, it would be similar to the Old Head of Kinsale.

The public would be excluded and only allowed enter at times and under conditions set by the owners of what would essentially be a private sports facility.

It is only because of the single-minded pursuit of the Tank Field by the gaelscoil authorities that the school does not now have a permanent building elsewhere.

There are, and have been, many alternative sites available for the gaelscoil, including some already in state ownership.

The Tinkers Cross site which was approved for the school as long ago as 2001, is still available. Last year it was again recommended by a senior official in the Department of Education. Mayfield GAA club has offered a site and, according to the senior executive planner of the city council, the needs of the school could be met on a site that is more appropriate than the Tank Field.

There is no alternative to the Tank Field as a public open space. If it is lost, it is lost forever.

That would be no precedent to create for other public spaces in the city and no legacy to leave to future generations.



Objectors gather to protest against the development of a new school building for Gaelscoil An Ghoirt Álainn at the Tank Field, Montenotte, Cork; and below, students, parents and members of the public march in support of the development. Cork City Council will tonight vote whether or not to rezone the Tank Field which would pave the way for a new building to be built. Pictures: Billy MacGill, Des Barry