

Prescott casino influence denied

The row over John Prescott's stay at a US tycoon's ranch will not influence an inquiry into the siting of the UK's first super casino, its head insists.

Stephen Crow, of the Casino Advisory Panel, was speaking at a public meeting on a bid to build a Las Vegas-style casino at the Millennium Dome.

The site is currently the frontrunner in the race to secure a licence.

But it has attracted controversy after it emerged Mr Prescott stayed at its owner Philip Anschutz's US ranch.

,Silly stories'

The deputy prime minister has repeatedly insisted that he has not been involved in the casino application process and that Mr Anschutz's company, AEG, has received no preferential treatment.

Prof Crow opened the first in a series of public hearings in central London by insisting Mr Prescott had not selected his panel and would have no influence over its deliberations.

„What role has John Prescott played in our process, I hear you thinking – none.

„As I said we were appointed by the secretary of state for culture media and sport,“ said Prof Crow.

The setting up of the panel was agreed by Cabinet sub-committees overseen by Mr Prescott but he did not choose its members.

Prof Crow told the BBC Mr Prescott's meetings with Mr Anschutz could „complicate the matter“ as they had led to „silly stories“.

But he denied Conservative claims that the whole process was „mired in confusion“.

Tory shadow culture secretary Hugo Swire said that the number of stories coming out of the selection process had „not exactly given people a great deal of confidence“ in it.

Lib Dem culture spokesman Don Foster said the panel should require each shortlisted council to carry out public opinion research before a final decision is made.

„No decisions‘

Prof Crow said he would take into consideration work done on the Dome site by AEG but it did not in any way indicate the firm had secured an advantage.

And at the hearing he insisted that the choice of the first super-casino was not – as some have claimed – a foregone conclusion.

„Is Greenwich a done deal for the regional casino? The answer to that question is no. I do not know how I can spell it out – it is N.O.,“ he said.

„We have made no such decision – in fact we have made no decision at all until we have considered everything, including those proceedings over the rest of the week and those next week and any other questions we think to ask afterwards.“

The professor spoke out as it emerged rival bidder Havering Borough Council has lodged an application for leave to pursue a judicial review after its plan for a casino at Rainham, in the Thames Gateway, was dumped from the shortlist.

Prof Crow told the hearing he did not believe the legal

challenge would be successful.

Terror target

Peter Brooks, deputy leader of Greenwich Council, said a casino at the Dome would lead to regeneration of the peninsula through the building of a 320-bed „world class“ hotel, a second 400 to 500-bed hotel, a theatre and exhibition space.

The development of an entertainment district would bring £600m investment into Greenwich, with 10,000 new homes, jobs, schools, higher education facilities, parks and open spaces.

The council would also tackle problem gambling with the creation of a „multi-agency panel“, he said.

David Campbell, chief executive of AEG Europe, said under 18s would not be allowed into the casino, which would be three stories above floor level and guarded by security.

But Prof Crow questioned whether all of the jobs created would go to local people.

Rev Malcolm Torry, of the multi-faith Greenwich Peninsula Chaplaincy, said members of some faith groups, such as Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, might refuse to work in casino on „conscience“ grounds.

Chief Supt Peter Lowton, Greenwich's borough police commander, said the Dome was „potentially an iconic target“ and contingency plans were being worked on to counter an attack by terrorism or fire.

Key tests

Other groups invited to participate in Wednesday's meeting included: the Greater London Assembly, Salvation Army, and a group called the Case Against Super Casino Expansion.

Further meetings are planned around the UK to consider other

bids, with the panel due to give its final recommendations on 31 December.

Prof Crow said the key tests for the successful location would be social impact and regeneration.

He also confirmed the panel is considering whether to add another candidate to the shortlist after Brent in North West London withdrew its Wembley application.

The Dome bid is being considered first because it had emerged as the frontrunner after the first round of judging, ahead of Glasgow and Blackpool.

But AEG was forced to apologise earlier this week after it sent documents to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport suggesting the multi-faith group Greenwich Peninsula Chaplaincy was broadly positive about the casino plan.

Only one super-casino is initially being permitted under the terms of the Gambling Act 2005, to be selected from the provisional shortlist drawn up in May.

Bidders then included: Blackpool, Wembley, Cardiff, Glasgow, the Millennium Dome, Manchester, Newcastle upon Tyne and Sheffield.