

Government committee looks at casino alternatives in Manchester

A top-level government committee will meet for the first time this week to consider alternatives to a supercasino in Manchester. It will be chaired by Local Government Secretary and Salford MP Hazel Blears.

She has told Manchester Evening News that, while she understood why many people were disappointed the supercasino plans had been abandoned, she hoped to draw up plans to provide thousands of jobs in east Manchester.

„It was made clear by Culture Secretary Andy Burnham that a supercasino in Manchester was not going ahead,“ said Blears. „I am trying to ensure a package of regeneration measures is presented to bring employment to east Manchester.“ Also on the special committee will be ministers from other departments, including transport, and Manchester city council leader Sir Richard Leese.

Though the supercasino was estimated to bring thousands of jobs, Blears is hoping her regeneration plans will bring even more over the next few years. Gordon Brown recently said he was in favour of a very substantial regeneration scheme for east Manchester. „When we cancelled the supercasino, our view has always been that not only Manchester but also Blackpool should have more measure of regeneration,“ said the Premier.

Brown has asked Blears to take charge of the local election campaign, co-ordinating Labour's bid to win seats. The minister told the newspaper that Labour would fight Tory attempts to get a foothold in big cities such as Manchester. She said: „We also need to be ready for a General Election whenever Gordon Brown decides to call it. We cannot assume

that he will wait until 2010.”

The formation of the ministerial group was met with some scepticism in Manchester. The city was selected by an independent panel as the site of Britain’s first supercasino, only to miss out after the House of Lords rejected the plan.

On becoming prime minister, Brown made it clear he intended to scrap the scheme. Blairs was asked to come up with alternative forms of regeneration. But there was fury in Manchester when it emerged that her proposals failed to guarantee a single job and pledged just us\$ 20.1 million for clean-up work at the proposed supercasino site at Sportcity.

Blairs said at the time that critics should wait for the outcome of the ministerial group’s work before forming a judgement.