

The €1billion car park

EXCLUSIVE



by Karen Rice

Investigations Editor

TAXPAYERS face a €1billion bill if the new children's hospital goes ahead at the Mater site, the former chairman of the controversial project has revealed.

In an exclusive interview with the Irish Daily Mail, Philip Lynch says problems associated with the cramped site are so complex that costs could skyrocket to €1billion – double the €500million originally estimated for the ill-fated project.

Mr Lynch, who stepped down as chairman of the National Paediatric Hospital Development Board last October, also warns that philanthropists, whose help is badly needed to close the funding gap, would only support the right site for the proposed new hospital. And the HSE's preferred site at the Mater hospital will, he says, 'always be wrong'.

'The project will cost €1billion because of the complexity of the site,' Mr Lynch told the Mail. 'It is always back to the unnecessary cost of having to shoehorn the hospital into a very tight, awkward space, going four levels under basement for a car park and 16 storeys up, when you need not be there at all.'

'We got rid of Ballymun, why are we going back to that situation for our children?'

'It's not for the children of tomorrow, we're not building something that's going to be correct in 2020 or 2040. And that's what we want in today's age. Why dig a hole to put the hospital in? The hole-in-the-

'It's a nightmare of an old hospital site'

ground car park and foundations will run to €120million – it will be the most expensive car park in Dublin. But will there be cash to fund anything on top of that?

'I could imagine a far better facility built at one or two-storey level, no underground car parking, plenty of estate and gardens, and connectivity to the Luas.'

'You can get the same facility built far cheaper on a simple site and it need not be a massive concrete facility. It's important that they reach a conclusion that will be a good one for sick kids.'

'The Mater is a nightmare of an old hospital site. It's too complicated and, in my opinion, it will never get done. For the children of Ireland the location is wrong and it will always be wrong.'

'It should never have been the site of choice.'

The revelations come a week after the Government launched a cost effectiveness review of the NPH project, which is haemorrhaging an estimated €650,000 a week even though a single brick has yet to be laid.

Announcing the four-week review, Health Minister James Reilly said that a team comprising architect John Cooper and four international clinical experts would analyse all aspects of the project, including whether it could be built at a different and cheaper location.

Mr Lynch, who welcomes the review, says that the State owns 'sites galore' under Nama that should now be considered. 'In the light of the property collapse, there are some fabulous sites with connectivity, in the city and outside of the city that ought to be considered,' he says. 'These sites are cheap, and they won't be as cheap again.'

'The Beacon is a most modern hos-



Construction headache: 100,000 tonnes of soil will have to be moved from Mater site

In a devastating interview, the former chairman of the Children's Hospital lashes out at the site, the cost and how Mary Harney stifled other ideas... and why the unfinished Anglo buildings could be the best option

pital, they could co-locate it with that. Noel Smyth put forward the best of plans at Newlands Cross, it's a wonderful and spacious site.

'Crumlin has the best brand, and fundraising capacity, it's a wonderful facility. There's the half-built Anglo building – there are hundreds of apartments within that district where parents could live, and the Government owns the building.'

'It is important that a hospital is built in the least time and at the least cost. We are expected to collect €250million by way of philanthropy. Philanthropists will be there to support the right project, not the wrong project.'

'Let's hope the kids of Ireland get

a proper service, because they've been waiting for years and years.'

Dr Reilly's announcement came on the same day that NPH chief executive Eilish Hardiman quit her post to take up a position at Tallaght Hospital – the third senior executive to quit the project in recent months.

Mr Lynch, the chief executive of investment company One51, resigned as Development Board chairman in October last year, citing 'fundamental differences' with then Health Minister Mary Harney.

He had raised concerns about the suitability of the site, planning and design challenges and a shortfall in funding for the project, but Mary Harney refused to consider an alter-

native site. Minister Harney was said to be furious after Mr Lynch had talks with businessman Noel Smyth, who had offered to build a similar-size children's hospital on 12 acres of land at Newlands Cross, near the Naas Road and off the M50, for a third of the cost of the Mater site.

This week a source told the Mail that Mr Lynch was not the only member of the Board who struggled with the minister, and that the Board found it difficult to access information about the project while she was in charge of health.

'The more questions that were asked, the greater the resistance,' our source says. 'You couldn't raise anything with Harney – it had to be



'Not for children of tomorrow': Philip Lynch, ex-NPH chairman

the Mater. Questions about access and traffic didn't want to be heard. It was impossible for the chief executive to make progress. As a board member, you're meant to leave your hat outside the door. But what went on in the boardroom was being fed to Harney the next day.'

Critics, including Mr Lynch, have claimed the selection of the site was politically motivated because it was in the constituency of former taoiseach Bertie Ahern. Those claims were strenuously rejected by former HSE chief Professor Brendan Drumm and by a spokesman for Mary Harney.

Although it is running four years behind schedule and has already cost an estimated €25million, the NPH Development Board has not yet applied for planning permission for the project. This will now not be done until after the results of the Government review are known. But should the design get the green light at the Mater site, the project faces myriad additional problems.

'You couldn't raise anything with Harney'

'They have to take one hundred thousand tonnes of soil off the site to make the project happen,' a source close to the project told the Mail.

'That level of digging runs the risk of contamination. There's the impact on local residents and traffic, planning and architectural issues around moving 10,000 truck loads of rubble off the site.'

'There are also power issues. There isn't adequate power in the location and there was talk of the ESB putting a power station on the site but that's been shelved. The station and accommodating fire officers could take up half an acre of the three-acre site.'

'There are also questions about the staff in the new hospital. All the people employed in the three hospitals that are to be amalgamated in the NPH have a divine right to a job in the new facility. They will have to be paid, they have rights.'

'It's an enormous industrial relations issue in the making.'

Responding to questions from the Mail, a spokesman for the board said there would be 'efficiencies' in staffing the proposed NPH but that it was 'too early to get into detail'. He was unable to say whether there is adequate power to supply the hospital on the site but denied there were plans for a power station.

When asked about the cost of the project, the board spokesman said: 'We haven't realised any detail of the budget. The €650million is a budget that's been speculated on in the public domain, and it would appear to be the working budget as far as people are concerned.'

'Budget figures are subject to a tender process and that is something that will hopefully happen later this year.'

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