

Campaigners fight on for Hampstead Sabbath zone

THE campaign to establish the eruv, a zone in which Sabbath laws can be relaxed, in north London goes on, campaigners said today.

Barnet Council's planning committee last night rejected the proposal by 11 to seven (with two abstentions), deciding not to allow 85 poles to be erected on pavements throughout the borough, including the Hampstead Garden Suburb conservation area, which would mark out the zone.

But campaigners have already said they will appeal against the ruling, which means the issue will eventually be settled by a Department of the Environment inspector after a public inquiry.

Rabbi Alan Kimche said after the meeting: "This is a sad day for religious tolerance and understanding in Barnet."

"The councillors were swayed by spurious and fictitious fears and their decision was not representative of the general feeling in the community."

The planning committee's decision, which went against the recommendation of council officers, is a setback for those who have been pressing for five years to establish Britain's first eruv.

It also means the debate, which has inflamed passions inside and outside the Jewish community, will continue for months, and possibly years.

The zone would make it easier for Jews to move about on the Sabbath, allowing the elderly and disabled to use wheelchairs and mothers to push prams within an 11-mile perimeter.

The planning application was for the erection of 85 poles, linked by wire 21 feet above the ground — a prospect which councillors opposed to the scheme described as intrusive and unsightly.

Frank Davis, a former mayor of Finchley and a prominent member of the

by Martin Delgado

Jewish community, said the posts would be an alien feature which would add to street clutter.

About 20 of the poles, he claimed, would be directly outside bedroom windows.

Another opponent, Sheila Scott, said the poles would create a hazard for the blind.

But Melvin Cohen, who voted in favour of the eruv, said: "Once this thing is up and running, people won't notice it."

Several councillors accused planning officers of double standards for recommending approval of the eruv, while refusing to allow street signs to local churches and community centres.

There were also suggestions the wire would be a hazard for birds.

Councillors have been deluged with letters, petitions and phone calls from both sides during the past few months. Although the

public gallery was packed for last night's meeting there was virtually no heckling and the dozens of police on standby at the town hall in case of trouble soon withdrew.

Councillor Jack Cohen, who said he had received hurtful and distasteful messages from opponents of the scheme, appealed to both sides not to indulge in recriminations.

Another councillor, Jane Ellison, said the eruv would be of far greater benefit to far more people than most of the applications which came before the planning committee.

Committee vice-chairman Don Goodman predicted after the two and a half hour debate that the pro-eruv lobby would win "hands down" on appeal.

Council leader Roy Shutz said: "We have quite exceptionally good community relations in Barnet and I am sure everyone will do their utmost to make sure they continue."

The eruv question

ORTHODOX Jews are disappointed at Barnet Borough Council's refusal to allow an "eruv" in North London, a zone in which Sabbath restrictions can be relaxed. But there is a solution. The island of Manhattan is an eruv. Why not declare the same for Great Britain in its entirety?