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Eruv moves step nearer to reality

Belief grows that Gummer has been told: No grounds to refuse poles plan

SPECULATION is growing that the planning inspector examining the eruv boundary has told Environment Secretary John Gummer that there are no technical grounds for rejecting the controversial religious plan.

Mr Gummer returned this week from holiday to weigh up the moral arguments behind the eruv proposal, which has bitterly divided Jews in North London. He will have considered a report from his inspector that is thought likely to have left him with no planning reason to turn it down.

Supporters and opponents of the plan — for the demarcation of a symbolically enclosed Jewish area of six-and-a-half square miles of Golders Green, Hampstead Garden Suburb and Hendon — are bracing themselves for a result this month of the public inquiry held by the inspector, David Bushby, last November.

Mr Bushby's judgment was completed at the beginning of the summer. The delay in Mr Gummer's final decision has given rise to speculation that Mr Bushby

has reached the same conclusions as those of Barnet Council's planning officers last year — that on planning grounds, the network of 85 poles and accompanying wire within which Orthodox Jews could push prams and wheelchairs on a Sabbath could be erected.

The Environment Secretary, himself a religious man who left the Anglican Church to join Rome in protest at the ordination of women, is understood to be sensitive to the religious debate.

He is also believed to be conscious of the wide range of opinions on the eruv among prominent Jews in the Tory Party.

According to sources, it is highly unlikely that he would have delayed his decision for so long had Mr Bushby found planning grounds to reject the proposal.

Hendon South MP John Marshall said: "He is a man of very deep religious susceptibilities and it may be taking him longer than most planning issues would."

The Department of the Environment said that although the Secretary of State returned from his holidays this week, he flew straight to South America for a 14-

day conference.

But a DoE spokesman said it was not inconceivable for him to make a decision and complete the paperwork on the eruv proposal while abroad.

Mr Bushby said at the inquiry that his main consideration was whether planning objections outweighed the need for an eruv.

But the DoE spokesman emphasised that it was up to Mr Gummer whether to accept the findings of a planning inspector.

The eruv controversy has been fiercely contested for more than two years, with its proponents accusing even Jewish eruv opponents of being anti-Semitic and opponents claiming that it threatened to divide a multicultural community.

The Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, and his predecessor, Lord Jakobovits, both gave evidence to the public inquiry supporting the eruv. Among opponents who appeared were the Rev Lord Soper, the chairman of the Press Complaints Commission, Lord McGregor, and the former Labour Trade Secretary, Edmund Dell.