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News

Financial backers insure that eruv will go ahead

Organisers deny that taxpayers will be liable

by **Mo Atchia**

THE NatWest bank and Norwich Union are to underwrite the controversial eruv in Barnet.

The high street banking giant has agreed to supply the United Synagogue Eruv Committee (USEC) with a £10,000 bank guarantee while Norwich Union has confirmed that it will underwrite a £10 million public liability insurance.

Both were conditions imposed by Barnet Council when it granted a licence for the eruv in August last year.

It is believed that Transport for London – which must also grant USEC a licence allowing poles to be situated along major highways – is close to finalising an agreement after discussions with the group over Christmas.

The six-and-a-half square mile eruv, covering parts of Hampstead Garden Suburb and Golders Green, will allow Jews to perform simple activities, such as pushing prams on the Sabbath and will be marked out with poles linked by fishing line.

Objectors had called for Barnet to suspend talks with USEC until it could prove that it was able to meet the bank guarantee and insurance conditions.

They are concerned that USEC recorded assets of "nil" with Companies House in November and was recently quizzed as part of a Charity Commission investigation into the financial affairs of the United Synagogue.

But USEC spokesman, Edward Black, said: "We were contacted by the Charity Commission which simply had a few questions to ask us after being contacted by a member of the public, which it was duty bound to do, and to which we provided simple answers."

Mr Black said that claims by opponents of the eruv that taxpayers would be left to foot the bill for removal of poles should it fail were "patent nonsense".

He said that the NatWest had agreed to provide a bank guarantee of £10,000 once the eruv "came on-line" later on this year.

He said that the sum would cover the costs of removing eruv poles "in the unlikely event of USEC ceasing to exist".

He added that the bank and Norwich Union had written to Barnet Council confirming their intention to underwrite the eruv.

"USEC is a dormant company at present because work on the eruv has not begun yet," said Mr Black.

"We've indicated to them [the NatWest and Norwich Union] that they will be paid...[from] charitable donations...which will be transferred into USEC when the eruv is established."

Mr Black did not reveal the combined value of donations, which he said was "sufficient to establish the eruv" and added that the money was currently sitting in a separate bank account.

Elizabeth Segall, of the Eruv Boundary Opponents Group, said: "In view of the Charity Commission's inquiry [into the United Synagogue] and the possible relevance of this to the Eruv Committee, Barnet should suspend any further work on taking the eruv further until the outcome of the inquiry is known."

A letter sent to Ms Segall by a Charity Commission official last month stated: "...the inquiry officer [is] to follow up the outstanding information from the charity [the United Synagogue] relating to the USEC funds as part of their investigation into the other matters...I hope this is helpful and explains to you that we are taking your concerns seriously..."

The Charity Commission launched its inquiry into the United Synagogue after it was blamed for the collapse of a cemetery fraud trial last year.

A Charity Commission spokeswoman said: "The Eruv Committee is not a separate investigation. All the issues will be looked at as part of the one investigation."

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