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HEADLINE: Victory for Jewish community in battle over 'eruv';
Gummer gives go-ahead for establishment of Britain's first symbolic
enclave. Ian MacKinnon and Simon Midgley report

BYLINE: IAN MACKINNON and SIMON MIDGLEY

BODY:

FRESH controversy threatened to erupt last night after a government minister gave the go-ahead for the setting up of a symbolic religious enclave in north London for Britain's largest Orthodox Jewish community.

Even before John Gummer, Secretary of State for the Environment, gave his approval yesterday for the six-square-mile eruv in Hampstead Garden Suburb, Hendon and Golders Green, a group strongly opposed to the proposal had begun exploring ways to continue its fight if the decision went against it. It may seek a judicial review of the decision.

A number of other Jewish communities around the country which have been waiting for the outcome of the application, may now submit their own proposals to establish an eruv - where strict religious laws regarding the carrying of objects outside the home on the Sabbath are relaxed.

The eruv is a symbolic enclosure derived from Jewish laws concerning a walled city. Eruvs exist in Israel, the United States, Australia, Canada and France.

Orthodox Jews within the north London eruv - to be marked for the most part by natural boundaries like roads and railway lines, though also by telegraph-type poles joined by fine fishing line where it crosses streets - will also be allowed to push prams and wheelchairs on the Sabbath.

The local planning authority, Barnet, twice rejected the proposals by the United Synagogue on the grounds that the 85 poles, in particular those in the Hampstead Garden Suburb conservation area, would contravene legislation stipulating that any addition to the street furniture should "preserve or enhance" the environment.

But the synagogue's eruv committee appealed against the decisions and last December, a week-long public inquiry heard evidence both strenuously attacking and defending the proposal, often straying far wider than narrow planning concerns.

Yesterday, however, Mr Gummer gave his approval, backing his inspector's view that the scheme would not seriously harm the character or appearance of the area, even in the conservation area

where five sets of poles will be erected.

Reaction among those in the Jewish community who have campaigned for the eruv was muted, as most were celebrating Succoth, the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles or harvest festival, and observing strict Sabbath-like rules - no carrying, working, turning on switches, driving, shopping or answering the telephone.

Supporters were clearly delighted by the decision which, they maintained, would have virtually no effect on those outside the faith, but make life considerably easier for Orthodox Jews.

"It's something you can't see," said one woman. "You won't even notice it unless you want to. But, for women in particular, it will make a big difference. They'll be able to, say, push a pram to the synagogue. If you're religious, without an eruv your religion can stop you from worshipping at synagogue."

Outside Hendon Synagogue, the wife of an Orthodox rabbi, and her 24-year-old son wearing a yarmulke (a skull cap), were on their way to visit a relative. "The majority of people living in this area will be very happy," she said. "Most are young couples living here with children. At present during the festival they are stuck in the house for two days."

They declined, however, to give their names for security reasons in the wake of a recent spate of anti-Jewish graffiti in the neighbourhood. Their anxiety seemed only to highlight some of the fears outlined by the scheme's opponents, including many Jews.

Less orthodox Jews who fled eastern Europe and the Holocaust are anxious that any demarcation could label the area as a ghetto. "The fear is that it is a very obvious symbol of Jewishness and as such could make the area a target for vandals and thugs," said one. Conversely, some Ultra Orthodox Jews object to any relaxation of Sabbath rules.

Gentiles have also expressed alarm at having to live in such an area. Elizabeth Lawrence, of the Barnet Eruv Objectors Group, said: "To start demarcating a six-square mile area of London so that a minority can defy their religious beliefs is rather extraordinary. It's a small section of the community exerting their will over the rest."

After the heated argument surrounding the inquiry many, even among the opponents, hope that calm heads will now prevail and accept Mr Gummer's decision.

Frank Davis, a Tory councillor who voted against the plan, said: "The umpire has raised his finger, it's time to walk quietly."

(Photograph omitted)

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