

Publication: The Southampton Press

Mar 18, 2015 10:08 AM

Search Continues For Elusive Eruv Markers In Westhampton Beach

Editor's Note:

[VIEW A MAP OF THE LOCATIONS OF THE UTILITY POLES REPORTEDLY HAVING LECHIS ATTACHED.](#)

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UPDATED Mar 18, 2015 1:18 PM

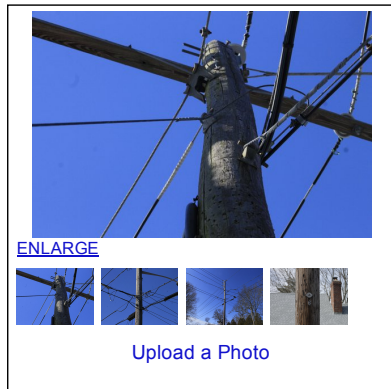
By Kyle Campbell

Seven months after the creation of a religious boundary encircling Westhampton Beach Village, locating the actual markers identifying that boundary's borders is a fruitless endeavor—fueling speculation among non-believers that it does not exist, and forcing those of the Orthodox Jewish faith who are benefiting from its establishment to take a leap of faith.

Some people who live in and around the village have mistaken wooden wire covers and pieces of string attached to utility poles as being the markers, known formally as lechis. But the markers in this case are said to be translucent PVC strips, meant to mark the outline of the boundary, or eruv—and attempts to find a single one have repeatedly come up empty. For some, it calls into question the legitimacy of the religious boundary.

"It's supposed to be visible—you're supposed to see it, and the lechis are supposed to go from the bottom of the pole all the way to within 3 inches of the wires [at the top]," said Jack O'Dwyer, an avid opponent of the eruv who has split time between Westhampton Beach and New York City for nearly three decades. "The whole thing is fake, man. I hope it never goes through."

At issue is religious law that bans Orthodox Jews from certain activities on the Sabbath, including simple activities like carrying keys and pushing strollers, outdoors. An eruv is a way around the restriction: It essentially creates an "indoor" space by using lechis to create symbolic "walls," making it easier to attend temple, for example, with children and house keys in



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tow.

Supporters say the eruv was established in Westhampton Beach last August. Its creation was heralded by The Hampton Synagogue on Sunset Avenue in the village—the original applicant for the boundary—and the East End Eruv Association, the organization currently embroiled in lawsuits with Westhampton Beach and Quogue villages, as well as Southampton Town, with the hopes of expanding the boundary so that it encompasses more than five square miles, including portions of Quogue and Quogue Village, on the South Fork.

Officials representing the East End Eruv Association, or EEEA, say the eruv was consecrated by a rabbi after the lechis were attached to various utility poles throughout the village last summer. This came after a U.S. District Court ruling by Judge Kathleen Tomlinson last June, stating that the village was powerless to stop the installation.

Interested parties who call the synagogue will hear an automated message stating that the



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current status of the eruv is "up."

Earlier this month, The Press obtained, through a Freedom of Information request, a record of the 46 utility poles licensed to the EEEA by the Long Island Power Authority and Verizon for use in the eruv. A thorough examination of those poles over several weeks revealed no apparent markers on any of them, even though many were purported to have two lechis on them.

When asked to verify what the lechis look like, or where they are located on the 46 poles, officials with the Public Service Enterprise Group Long Island, a subsidiary of LIPA, were at a loss.

"LIPA licensed the poles to the East End Eruv Association, and they've handled everything," PSEG spokeswoman Elizabeth Flagler said. "We've been told that they've been built, but we don't maintain them, so I couldn't tell you what they look like."

EEEE officials swear that the lechis have been installed, saying the eruv would not be official if they were not. However, those same officials have denied repeated requests to disclose the whereabouts of the lechis and, after LIPA provided The Press with documentation showing the poles where they are supposed to have been installed, have refused to provide any proof of their existence.

"The rabbi who certified the eruv knows of their locations, and that's all that matters," Manhattan-based EEEA spokesman Hank Sheinkopf said Tuesday afternoon. "We are reasonably concerned about vandalism, so it makes no sense to reveal locations and, as we've always said, they're hardly visible to the eye if at all."

Mr. Sheinkopf previously denied requests seeking the location of the lechis, citing concerns that people who oppose the eruv would take it upon themselves to climb the poles and remove the markers.

Bob Sugarman, one of the Manhattan-based attorneys representing the EEEA in its litigation, said the lack of visibility of the markers only furthers his argument that the eruv is not causing any type of damage to village residents who do not follow Orthodox Judaism.

Furthermore, he maintained, the lechis should be of no concern to anyone who is not an Orthodox Jew.

"This is an issue which is internal within the Jewish community—it doesn't have any impact, and you speaking to a rabbi is not going to change that," Mr. Sugarman said after being asked to supply contact information for the rabbi who certified the eruv. "The whole focus that has been put on this is irrelevant. It simply doesn't matter."

Because the EEEA installed the lechis themselves, PSEG has no record of their installation. Likewise, those who live near the supposed hosting poles have no recollection of this work being done either.

Two utility poles adjacent to Wendy Erwin's home on Bishop Place in Westhampton Beach are supposed to have lechis installed on them, placed there last summer, according to LIPA records. However, she said she observed no such activity.

"I think my husband would have noticed something like that," Ms. Erwin said when asked about the lechi that was reportedly installed on the pole next to her driveway.

Similarly, Mayor Maria Moore, who lives on Lilac Road, where five poles were licensed to accommodate a total of 10 lechis, said she had no knowledge of their installation either. Ms. Moore said that though she hasn't made a point of looking for them, she has never seen one of the markers when walking around her neighborhood.

"In that regard, I don't know any more than anyone else," she said. "The synagogue had a ceremony to bless the eruv and they did file papers in court saying the eruv is up."

"[The EEEA] swore in an affidavit in court that the lechis were up," she continued. "So, I would be surprised if they were to do that if that was not the case."

Village Trustee Ralph Urban said the board has been approached by residents who are skeptical about the existence of the lechis, something, he said, board members cannot help but question themselves. "Yes, we are wondering," he said. "To be honest, that's still in the hands of our attorneys and we haven't heard back from them about that yet."

Mr. Urban noted that neither he, nor anyone he knows, has been able to find any of the lechis.

On Tuesday morning, Village Trustee Patricia DiBenedetto said she was not at liberty to discuss what she'd seen because the village's litigation with the EEEA is ongoing.

Trustees Hank Tucker and Charlie Palmer did not return calls seeking comment.

Contrary to what had been previously suggested, the poles licensed to the EEEA do not run along the village's borders, but rather many are sprinkled throughout central parts of the municipality,

such as on Lilac Road, Liberty Street and Old Riverhead Road, leaving some swaths of the village outside the limits marked by the lechis, including Dune Road east of Rogers Beach and the area north of Montauk Highway and west of Old Riverhead Road.

However, Mr. Sugarman said the lechis need not specify the exact border of the eruv, because it is the overhead utility lines that actually mark the boundary and carry it pole to pole. He insists the entire village falls within the eruv.

"They do not need to be placed on every pole, they do not need to be placed around the outside of the village," he said. "It's the telephone wires that mark where the eruv is."

Some people have taken it upon themselves to scour the village for lechis, including Mr. O'Dwyer, who has covered the ongoing litigation on his website, www.odwyerpr.com, and its corresponding newsletter, both of which cover the public relations industry.

Despite being the most vocal eruv critic, Mr. O'Dwyer believes he recently found a lechi on Oneck Road; a closer inspection of the pole in question revealed a wooden cover for an electrical wire.

Remsenburg resident Stephanie Davis also had her curiosity piqued when she heard the news that the eruv had been established. So she decided to look for lechis while taking her dog, Lexi, for a walk shortly after the news broke. Sure enough, she said she found what she believed to be lechis—pieces of string tied to screws at the bottom and near the top of two utility poles on South Road near White Oak Lane in Westhampton Beach.

"I saw the Five Towns Eruv truck in the area," Ms. Davis said, referring to a maintenance vehicle from an eruv district in southwest Nassau County. "It was a weekend day, and I was coming back from the beach. I'd never seen them before, so I knew they had to be the lechis."

Alas, another red herring: In addition to not matching the given description of the lechis as translucent PVC, neither pole has been licensed to the EEEA for the eruv.

Despite the lack of hard evidence suggesting that the lechis are in place—something all parties recognize as a requirement for an eruv—simply having the synagogue's seal of approval is all some village residents need.

"If I have Tropicana orange juice, and there's a kosher sign on it, I'm not going to question a rabbi to see if it's kosher," said Clint Greenbaum, a parishioner of the Sunset Avenue synagogue and eruv supporter. "If the rabbi said the eruv is up, then it's kosher."

