

City's Progressive Reputation Hurt

White-Negro 'Buffer Zone' in Atlanta Provokes Bitter Dispute, Deep Rifts

By Harold Gulliver

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ATLANTA — Street barriers admittedly erected to create a "buffer zone" between Negro and white residential areas have split Atlanta and placed it under an uncomfortable spotlight as the Nation's latest sore spot of racial tension.

Although placed on only two streets, the barricades already have fanned resentments affecting the entire city.

So bitter is the feeling that Negroes are expected to vote against a 43-million-dollar bond issue this spring, possibly killing proposals for schools and street improvements and a city auditorium.

Divisions also have appeared between white and Negro groups — creating schisms which could wreck civic harmony for years to come.

The barricades, which are emotionally—and inaccurately—referred to as Atlanta's "Berlin Wall," were ordered erected last Dec. 17 by the board of aldermen to close off two streets in southwest Atlanta—Peyton and Harlan rds. The racial "buffer zone" had been requested by white residents.

The low, fence-like barricades of steel and wood were placed across both streets the next day.

Virgil Copeland, president of the Southwest Citizens Association, defended the barricades as a "last resort" to lessen racial tension. It was the only way left, Copeland

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asserted, for white residents to thwart "vicious, block-busting tactics being used by Negro realtors."

Blocking the streets did not actually "wall in" anybody. But it forced motorists to drive about one mile farther before reaching a through street to the southwest, thus making it more difficult to travel between a Negro and white residential section.

A petition was filed in municipal court by both Negro and white groups, asking removal of the barricades as a public nuisance. It was dismissed by Judge Robert E. Jones, who held that the streets were closed and therefore the obstructions could not be nuisances.

Observers now believe the Peyton-Harlan barricades will remain until the case is carried through state or Federal courts.

Meanwhile, the controversy continues, with charges and countercharges exchanged almost daily.

The barriers do not legally affect the sale of property in any way. And it is considered likely they have only increased Negro determination to buy into certain white neighborhoods in Southwest Atlanta.

The barricades also have the support of Mayor Ivan Allen Jr., who said they serve as a "warning to unscrupulous real estate dealers, Negro and white."

Q. V. Williams, a co-chair-

man of the Negro Voters League, has denounced the barricades. The uproar caused him to observe: "These are the darkest days I've seen in Atlanta as far as race relations are concerned."

The Atlanta Constitution, a strong supporter of Mayor Allen on other issues, has also condemned the road barriers.

Even former Mayor William B. Hartsfield has been privately critical of his successor's position on the barricades.

"You should never make a mistake that can be photographed," Hartsfield said.

So far Mayor Allen has failed to work out any solution.

Ironically, his administration was elected with the solid support of Negro voters. Slightly more than one-third of the city's registered voters are Negro.

In addition to the possible loss of the bond issue, other effects of the city's action include:

- A shift in control of Atlanta's Negro leadership from older conservative elements to younger, more militant figures.

- Damage to Atlanta's "image" as a progressive city with a long history of biracial negotiations and compromises.

The controversy may produce one long-range benefit—a much needed focus on the need for better Negro housing.