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Common Sense And The Public Safety

The two-week cooling-off period in Greensboro's lunch counter protests ends this weekend.

During the interval, since near mob violence of two weeks ago, Woolworth and Kress managers along with the city's leadership have pondered what ultimate course to pursue. In the interim protests have spread to more than a dozen cities in the Southeast. Momentum behind the protests is not dying.

Involved are moral, legal and economic questions, and they impinge on one another.

Negro students have a sound moral position when they protest a policy which caters to their business at nine counters and slaps them in the face at the 10th.

Stores have a sound legal position when they say the law allows them to choose their clientele and serve or reject whom-ever they see fit.

But the same stores are on tenuous economic grounds—and even possibly shaky legal grounds—when they contemplate arresting for trespass customers they invite into parts of their stores and repel in other parts.

Above and beyond the rights of individuals and property are the public safety and welfare. The mayor, city council,

city manager and police are entrusted with upholding the law, preventing violence and preserving peace. They are not authorized to dictate to the store management. But they know fairly well that decisions should not be made which might precipitate violence and trigger the kind of disturbance already plaguing other communities—notably High Point and Portsmouth, Va.

There comes a time when public safety transcends individuals or property rights. Such a circumstance may grow out of what variety store managers decide to do next week.

These managers cannot let purely business considerations direct their decision. They must not remain blind to the serious nature of the lunch counter protests. They must open their eyes to the possible turmoil which could flare if their counters are open for segregated business with fanfare.

Moral principle and the good name of Greensboro are involved. This is not something to be done casually or without full consideration of the consequences. Judgment of city officials must play a strong part in whatever decision is made. They know better than anyone else what is at stake.