

## Arena plan: easy access for disabled But some wary of view for fans in wheelchairs

**By Marilyn Marks**

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When it comes to Broward's new arena, the average hockey fan will be thinking about ticket prices and the shortest beer line.

Janet Caron is thinking about whether the signs will be painted in pastels.

Caron, who is legally blind, was one of about 35 representatives of Broward's disabled community who met with an arena consultant Wednesday to ensure that disabled fans will have complete access to the new arena in Sunrise. Pastel signs, she said, might look pretty, but visually impaired people find them very hard to read.

With an acute awareness of both small and large barriers facing those with disabilities, the arena shared ideas on issues from parking to elevator doors with Kevin McGuire, the consultant. McGuire was hired by the arena's developers, Huizenga Holdings, to oversee the arena's compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

McGuire has a unique vantage point: He has been in a wheelchair since age 7. He was paralyzed when he was struck by a drunk driver as he played baseball.

"I can guarantee you that this arena will have more access than any arena in the country," McGuire told the representatives, most of whose initial skepticism melted into support.

But when the arena plans, which were unveiled Tuesday, drew criticism from Dominic Marinelli, a code specialist with the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans, who flew down from Buffalo to hear the presentation. Marinelli's organization sued over access issues at four arenas designed by Ellerbee Becket Architects and Engineers, which is also designing Broward's.

The four arenas – in Boston, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. – don't provide seats that will ensure all wheelchair-bound patrons can see full action, regardless of whether everyone else is standing. The problem is especially evident when unused space in wheelchair areas is sold to able-bodied patrons.

Broward's arena plan has the same flaw he said.

The lawsuit stems from different interpretations of whether federal law requires patrons who use wheelchairs to have completely clear sight lines at all times – or something less than that, the architect said in a telephone interview on Wednesday.

"We want to help here. We design what the owners want us

to design. But our owners are being sued left and right over this, and it's not a pleasant thing," said Robert A. Degenhardt, President and Chief Executive Officer of Ellerbee Becket.

Providing perfect sight lines would mean fewer arena seats, which would nibble away at the arena's bottom line, he said.

Degenhardt said his firm – which designs most arenas in the United States – is meeting with officials from the U.S. Department of Justice and the veterans' group to come up with an interpretation they all can accept.

Despite Marinelli's concerns, most participants at Wednesday's meeting seemed pleased by the Broward plans.

They showered McGuire with questions. A man in a wheelchair asked where wheelchair parking would be (near the plaza area by the main entrance and in the VIP garage) and whether Huizenga intended to make sure able-bodied fans would be prevented from using these spaces (yes).

A blind woman asked whether there would be Braille and raised lettering at restrooms, elevators and restaurants (yes).

A hearing-impaired man asked how the arena would make sure people like him could hear the game. (The stadium would have a "multichannel assisted listening system" with headsets, McGuire said.)

"The purpose of this meeting is to start the process. We're at the beginning of the design stage," said Huizenga Holdings Vice President, Alex Muxo. "We want to get your input." Additional meetings are scheduled.

Disabled fans can count on a variety of assistance, McGuire said. There will be more elevators than in any other arena – and they will have extra-wide doors to accommodate wheelchairs and strollers. A service center will assist patrons with any disability. Wheelchair locations are spread throughout the arenas.

Other plans have nothing to do with the arena structure itself. For example, all employees will undergo "sensitivity training" on disability-related issues, and restaurant and concession workers will attend a three hour class in basic sign language, McGuire said.

Disabled workers will be recruited at arena job fairs, he said.

Disability advocate, John Garon, who uses a wheelchair, applauded Huizenga for involving disabled residents "before the shovel goes in the ground." Most of his concerns were answered at the meeting he said.