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FOR TAMPA BAY

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WEATHER: High 77, low 53;  
Partly cloudy. **More 8B**

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## Disabled hockey fans soon will get a view

■ **Complaints prompt the Ice Palace to give up nearly 200 seats so everyone can see the action**

By JEFFREY GETTLEMAN  
Times Staff Writer

TAMPA – Like other hockey nuts, Eugene Sigler itches to watch the sticks dual, the puck fly and the players streak to the corners of the rink for an explosive rendezvous. But as a paraplegic in a wheelchair, Sigler gets left out in the cold whenever the action on the ice heats up.

“As soon as the game starts or there’s a big play, everyone jumps up, and I don’t see anything but backs,” said Sigler, 49, who was paralyzed in a car accident 20 years ago. “And when I ask people to sit down, they just turn around and look at me like I was crazy.”

Sigler was one of many Tampa Bay Lightning fans who complained to the Ice Palace about the problem. So the arena will soon remove seats in the line of sight of designated wheelchair space so those fans can see the action, too. The arena will lose nearly 200 seats under the plan, including a strip of choice real estate along the boards.

“This agreement is a first,” said Kevin McGuire, a consultant who has helped numerous arenas, includ-

ing the Ice Palace, find ways to meet accessibility standards.

The roots of the plan announced Wednesday reach back to December 1996 when Sigler, who held Lightning season tickets for three years, stopped going to games because he couldn’t see. He told the Ice Palace about the problem. They told him to write a letter.

Frustrated, Sigler, a retired military police officer who lives in Westchase, shared his problem with the Gulf Coast Chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America. The group was invited to tour the Ice Palace in February and used the opportunity to broach the line-of-sight problem.

The Palace listened.

“They were very receptive,” said Del McNeal, executive director of the veterans group.

Under the agreement, the palace will build wooden platforms for fans in wheelchairs and remove seats in line of sight. A special rink-side section will be created for wheelchairs, which has piqued Sigler’s interest in season tickets again.

Palace officials acknowledge that on top of construction expenses, the plan will cost even more because they’ll have fewer seats. It also avoids the kind of costly legal battles that other arenas have faced.

“But we’re satisfied with this solution,” said Palace spokesman Eric Bresler. “Sometimes it’s good to be proactive, and sometimes it’s good to listen.”

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