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## Don't strike out on this chance to be heard re ballpark access

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### **ABILITIES**

Play ball! The San Diego Padres are planning a new ballpark. I'm not going to debate whether we need a new ballpark; we're getting one. I am going to tell you about a meeting with Padres officials regarding accessibility and the new ballpark.

Kevin McGuire, a Boston consultant with a disability who advises ballpark planners in accessibility issues, suggested the first ballpark accessibility meeting, which was held at Qualcomm Stadium earlier this month. More than 100 local residents with disabilities attended.

Access issues on the agenda included: parking, wheelchair and companion seating, ramps, elevators, bathrooms, concession counter heights, employment programs and signs.

Though these are definitely valid issues, the bigger picture includes use of, lack of, common sense.

What does access mean? Does it mean segregated seating areas? Does it mean segregated entrances? Is it a time-worn "separate but equal" issue? Dennis Sharp, a member of the mayor's Citizens Review Committee (which deals with accessibility issues), isn't about to settle for minimum access. "I'm always being accused of asking for more than the minimum," he said. "...So, are you content with minimum wage?"

Sharp said he hoped that "an equal amount of money is spent on access issues as is spent on embellishments and design."

Bud Sayles, executive director of The Access Center of San Diego, says that with the graying of America, today's accessibility laws may not address the needs of ballpark attendees in the future.

Sticking to the letter of the law, assuming one knows the law, is a beginning. Both Sharp and Sayles noted that California has one of the toughest accessibility-related building codes in the country. And they're concerned that, because the architects, HOK Sports, are based in Kansas, they may not be up on California laws.

Sharp is looking for ways to make architects more responsive and accountable. "So far, we don't have that," he said.

Heading the meeting were McGuire and representatives from the Padres and HOK Sports.

Hot issues were:

- Service dogs need a service area. Disney's Epcot Center in Florida has an area set aside for toileting service dogs. This idea was definitely a hit.
- Semi-ambulatory seating with removable armrests.
- Concession counter height. Architectural plans propose to make all counters 34 inches tall. A question from the floor was, "What about the height of the condiment counters?"
- Family bathrooms? From the floor: YES!
- From the floor: "Multiple seating arrangements so families can be seated together."
- From the floor: "Wheelchair access to the field?"

"I want to see a globally accessible ballpark and wish that was all I need to say," Sayles said, "I see the meeting as a

proactive measure to prevent future lawsuits (regarding access)."

The plan for 13 elevators was impressive, Sayles said. Qualcomm has seven.

After the meeting, Peter Mirche, also a member of the Citizens Review Committee, said, "Because all of the pieces are in place, the new ballpark has the potential of being the most accessible park in the world, but we have to work hard to make it a reality."

Amy Vanderveld, a San Diego attorney with a disability, said, "With respect to the Padres, it is encouraging to know that they are interested in addressing the concerns of the disabled community before the construction begins..."

"I suspect that the current lawsuit against the Padres (and the city over access to Qualcomm) has provided some measure of motivation to include the disabled in the planning process."

"The lawsuit is based primarily on the fact that when the 1996-97 alterations were performed, the area where the Club Section is located (and remodeled).

"No disabled seating of any kind was provided in the Club Section. No wheelchair locations, no aisle transfer seats, no semi-ambulatory seats. Nothing," said Vanderveld.

Remember, this was the first meeting, and more are being planned. Speak up now, while you still might be able to make a difference in the accessibility of the ballpark.

The Access Center of San Diego has been designated as a funnel for information.