

# The Boston Globe Business

TUESDAY, AUGUST 29, 1995

## THE PRIVATE SECTOR

**JOAN VENNOCHI**

### Community access

**E**ight years ago, the headlines played like this: "Celtics fight seating plan for the disabled." Team owners and basketball fans who'd lost their season tickets were going to court over a seating plan for patrons who use wheelchairs; in protest, more than 100 wheelchair users demonstrated at Boston Garden.

From a public relations perspective, it wasn't a pretty picture. So it's understandable that those who will manage the fancy arena that is replacing the Garden would like a different image when the FleetCenter opens next month.

Lessons learned from the past partly explain a September 24 open house for the disabled that is one of the many promotional activities planned around the FleetCenter. But beyond the obvious desire for good press lurks an attempt to head off a very tangible and unpleasant threat to a smooth opening and rave reviews.

In December, the U.S. Department of Justice notified executives about a complaint, filed by the New England Chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America, that challenged the New Boston Corp. on some 150 compliance issues under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

According to Larry Moulter, who is overseeing the FleetCenter for owner Jeremy Jacobs, nearly all the issues have been resolved, which is why he is willing to talk about them now. "I think when the building is opened, it will be apparent it works for all people," says Moulter.

However, Earle Annis, president of the New England PVA, isn't predicting a quick resolution of matters that he says remain unresolved.

"We are not going to stop the opening of the FleetCenter. But once it's opened and the problems are evident, if we can't resolve them by negotiating, we will do what we feel we have to do," warns Annis. He says demonstrations are not planned, because they cast the protesters in a bad light.

The most serious concern in Annis' group involves sight lines. Members of the Paralyzed Veterans are arguing their right to wheelchair accessible seating that allows such patrons to see the full action even when the rest of the crowd stands up. Not getting an unobstructed view adds up to a "very serious problem that is hard for people on their feet to understand," says Annis.

FleetCenter people have been meeting regularly with groups representing various constituencies of the local disabled community and a year ago hired a Randolph-based consulting company run by Kevin McGuire, who would seem to have strong credibility on ADA issues since he is a paraplegic.

FleetCenter is providing wheelchair locations throughout the building, including the floor, executive suites and promenades - with room for service animals who guide the blind and hearing impaired. There will be elevator access, accessible bathrooms and concession stands, a box office equipped with a telecommunication device for the deaf and an access service center to assist patrons with any disability. FleetCenter has also hired a half-dozen disabled people.

Will it be enough to head off a controversy?

"I think when the building (FleetCenter) is opened, it will be apparent it works for all people."

- Larry Moulter, President  
NBG Group

Elmer Bartels, who heads the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, which helps people with disabilities find work, says, "Whether in the end they can satisfy every need of everybody, I don't know. They have made a valiant effort." And Stephen Spinetto, who is Mayor Menino's representative on issue affecting the disabled, calls FleetCenter's ADA compliance "terrific."

McGuire says his marching orders were to "comply with the law and do the right thing." But Annis says, "It's hard to be objective if you are being paid as an adviser." To which Kevin McGuire replies: "I'd rather have a Kevin McGuire in there assisting them, than leaving it to a nondisabled person who doesn't understand the issues."