

Football stadium to welcome the disabled

BY JON SAVELLE
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When Pat Allen and Ellerbe Beckett Architects hired Kevin McGuire as a consultant to the football stadium project, they gave him almost carte blanche to make the facility hospitable to persons with disabilities.

"Paul Allen's instructions were to allow all people with disabilities to have the same experience he has," McGuire said recently. "They were the most concise instructions I've ever had – and the most powerful."

McGuire, a paraplegic since suffering an injury in an auto accident during his youth, has become one of the most sought-after consultants in the nation when it comes to making buildings accessible under the Americans with Disabilities Act. His home and consulting business are in Boston, but he constantly crisscrosses the nation to work with architects, developers and organizations for the disabled.

On Washington state's new football stadium and exhibition hall, McGuire has three roles. In the first, he is working with Ellerbe Beckett to address the needs of the disabled as the architects design the building. He has met with local groups of disabled persons, whether with mobility, hearing, sight or psychiatric disabilities, and passed their concerns on to the designers. And McGuire has been working with concessionaires and vocational agencies to ensure that persons with disabilities are considered for jobs in the facility.

McGuire's second area of responsibility is programmatic, or making sure that what's built actually meets the needs of disabled visitors. That includes drafting policies for the use of facilities, and even guiding the layout and locations of such functions as ticketing, parking, drop-off and pick-up, and emergency evacuation.

The third step is training. McGuire said it is essential to train stadium staff and management in the needs of disabled patrons in order to be able to serve them satisfactorily, so he gives everyone a two-and-a-half hour training program on how to do it. Then he concludes with an interactive training exercise with frontline receptionists, wait staff and others who have direct contact with the public.

Some 16 elevators will carry fans between floors (as opposed to 3 in the Kingdome), and the new stadium will have twice as many restrooms as the Dome. What's more, many of those restrooms will be family or unisex rooms, where a disabled person can be assisted by a companion if necessary.

Many of these issues have come to light only through

discussions with disabled groups. McGuire said he has had regular meetings with the Disabled Veterans of America, for example, and the Easter Seal Society.

But providing for their needs in a stadium or arena presents some challenges for facility managers. For example, under ADA, the number of seats for disabled persons must be 1 percent of the total. In this stadium, that is 700 seats – plus another 700 for companions.

In practice, however, it is rare for more than 10 percent of those seats to be occupied by disabled persons during any given event. That means if regular seats are sold out, there is a demand among fans to use the disabled seats.

"You have issues of fraud where people fake a disability to get wheelchair seats," McGuire said.

Another issue is egress. Whereas generally patrons stream into a stadium over a period of time before an event, they leave all at once. This can overwhelm elevators that are intended for people who have no other means of exiting the building.

In both instances, training of stadium staff is critical. They have to know how to manage uncooperative or drunken fans, and how to protect the special seating areas for those who need them.

"The ADA is about access not special treatment," McGuire said. "I've been given very broad discretion. It's very easy to address in the design stage; otherwise you will have to find space."

"This building has got the best wheelchair seating in the country."

So far, McGuire has had two meetings with local disabled groups and another is planned.

But this football project isn't just about looking at seating. McGuire said First & Goal, Paul Allen's stadium development company, is looking at captioning for deaf fans, and audio play-by-play for the blind. Even more ambitiously, the group is considering a high-tech navigation system that would enable blind persons to get around the facility unassisted – possibly through a link to the satellite Global Positioning System.

Even if that kind of wizardry isn't used, however, McGuire said the stadium will have advanced the art of opening up public events to persons with disabilities.

"The goal is to make this building so that you don't need Kevin McGuire anymore, and he just spins off into the sunset," McGuire said.