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Disabled Stars fans fear new arena will price them out

By Sean Horgan

Staff Writer

The new American Airlines Center continues to take shape on the northern reaches of downtown, offering from the outside a glimpse of what its owners promise will be the highest link in the evolutionary scale of sports arenas.

But as DiAnna Yee and her husband Eddie drive to the Stars games at Reunion Arena this season, they glance at the new sports palace in the making and wonder if they'll ever see them drop the biscuit in the new digs.

The Yees and the other 127 Stars season-tickets holders who inhabit the disabled seating at Reunion Arena are worried that they are about to lose a heavy ticket discount that they have enjoyed since the team moved to Dallas in 1993. They pay from \$13 to \$18 per game for seats in the lower bowl that normally go for between \$55 and \$105.

And even if they retain some portion of the discount, they fret that whatever seats they can afford will leave them so far from the action to render the game almost unrecognizable.

"We are such avid fans that we would want to continue going to games in the new arena," DiAnna said, "But we just don't know if we're going to be able to afford it or where our seats would be."

"We've heard that our seats would be in the back two rows of the new building," said Leasa Isom, a second-year season-ticket holder who sits in the ambulatory-disabled seating at Reunion with her 78-year-old mother, Pauline Harvey, "I realize we get a wonderful discount, but why is it stopping now when they have all these suites?"

Disabled seats in the new arena will be spread throughout the building's five levels. It remains unclear what discounts will be applied to which seats

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when the Stars announce the new ticket prices in the next three months.

"The lower arena seats are going to be full price," team president Jim Lites said. "There will be a percentage of seats significantly cheaper [for disabled fans], but I don't anticipate the current discount. In the upper seat areas, the discount will be deep. They'll still have access to seats in the \$18 range, but the location will be different [from what they have got now]."

The Mavericks offer 172 wheelchair-accessible and ambulatory-accessible seats at Reunion Arena, and patrons pay \$8-15 for tickets that normally run \$39-70.

The Reunion Arena discounts for those using the disabled seating are some of the better entertainment deals in town. For instance, neither the Dallas Symphony Orchestra discounts seating for disabled people.

Stars officials say the new American Airlines Center falls within all federal and state guidelines regarding accessibility and seating for disabled people. "It complies in all regards to the applications of the ADA requirements," Lites said.

He was referring to the Americans with Disabilities Act, the federal law

that, among other things, mandates that at least 1 percent of the seating in new arenas be reserved for disabled patrons.

Kevin McGuire, the consultant hired by the arena owners to work with its architects on design issues related to disabled seating and access, said there will be seating for disabled seating in every price range.

"The wheelchair seating in this building is as good or better than any other arena's seating," said McGuire, Chairman & CEO of New-York-based McGuire Associates, Inc. "We've had deal with lots of issues, including sightlines and low-vision seating. And it's not just hockey and basketball. We've had to consider where we put wheelchair seating for rock concert or ice shows, taking into consideration the emergency evacuation factor. We don't want patrons with disabilities to get injured."

The quandary for the Stars is to come up with a cost structure that maximizes revenues without pricing out some of the franchise's most loyal fans or giving the perception that the team is insensitive to its disabled fans. Part of the problem is the cost of building and maintaining the arena that carries a price tag of more than \$350 million.

The Star's disabled fans have had a terrific deal since the team moved to Dallas. The team, recognizing that the Reunion's upper bowl was not accessible to disabled fans, placed all of the seats in the lower bowl and priced them equal to the cheapest seats in the house.

DiAnna Yee, who uses a wheelchair because of multiple sclerosis, said she appreciated how the Stars have treated her and other fans with disabilities. "It is not like we're not grateful," she said. "It's been wonderful. We're grateful for the time we've been able to do this."