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## Arena architects meet with people with disabilities

By LARRY LEBOWITZ

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The Florida Panthers brain trust spent Wednesday night wooing more people with grand visions of their new arena. But this time, the audience wasn't county commissioners. It was people with disabilities.

The move was a deliberate first step in hopes of preventing a class action suit from advocacy groups for people with disabilities.

The groups have been filing law suits and challenging the design of a new generation of sports palaces being built across the country.

Federal regulations require that arena wheelchair seats must not be isolated; must offer a choice of views and ticket prices; and, if spectators are likely to stand, provide a line of sight "comparable" to seats provided to the general public.

Local chapters of the Paralyzed Veterans Association sued for change in four recent arena plans: the MCI Center in Washington; CoreStates Spectrum in Philadelphia; Marine Midland Arena in Buffalo; and the FleetCenter in Boston.

All four were designed by Ellerbee Becket, the same architect Panther's owner H. Wayne Huizenga has hired to design the \$184.7 million arena in Sunrise.

The issue can be thorny. The federal Americans with Disabilities Act requires builders of public facilities to make reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities.

But those accommodations can be costly. The space needed to create five wheelchair seats with ramps could be used for as many as two dozen traditional seats – and that much more ticket revenue for team owners.

"We're trying to be proactive here," said Alex Muxo of Huizenga Holdings. "We're bringing all of these people in at the front end, getting them involved from the beginning, so they can see what we're doing and to get their perspective. We want them involved."

Muxo and other officials from Huizenga Holdings sponsored a brunch on Wednesday with about 40 advocates, people with different disabilities. They talked generally about their plans to accommodate the disabled – but were not ready to discuss many specifics, such as

sight lines or policies for selling unused spaces that area designed for the disabled.

The meeting was led by Kevin McGuire, 35, a Newburgh, NY lawyer and consultant on Americans with Disabilities Act issues, who has worked with arena owners in Boston, Philadelphia, and Tampa.

McGuire, a paraplegic since he was struck by a car at age 7, was involved in the early arena drawings, and will be working with the disabled community on design and operational issues before the arena opens in October, 1998.

"My marching orders have been, 'Do the right thing,'" McGuire told the audience.

McGuire will be working on such issues as the design of seating platforms, sensitivity training for ushers and food service workers and the availability of aids such as braille menus and transmitters for the hearing impaired.

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'Do the right thing.'"*

– Kevin McGuire, ADA Consultant

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Some advocates at Wednesday's meeting were happy to be involved so early in the process.

"There's a lot of good to it," said Denise Shaible, a visually impaired Margate woman who sits on the Broward advisory board on disabled issues. "But you need to have assurances that this is going to get done. I just hope it's legit."

But others, including the local executive director of the Paralyzed Veterans group were a bit more skeptical.

Julie K. Shaw, executive director of the local PVA chapter, said she wants a lot more information about sightlines and the type of seating systems that will be available at the Sunrise arena.

Shaw was accompanied by Dominic Marinelli, an associate for Paralyzed Veterans involved in Buffalo litigation.

"We're going to have similar issues here," Marinelli said.