

Accessible Features of New Stadiums

by Dominic Marinelli



The 1.26 million-square-foot Citi Field Stadium is expected to be completed by April 2009. (HOK Sport.)

Stadiums and arenas being planned and constructed today provide for the needs of fans with special accessibility needs significantly better than those constructed just 20 years ago. For example, the United Spinal Association and HOK Sports Architects are currently working with the Yankees and the Mets on HOK's new stadium projects in New York City not only to confirm compliance with the applicable accessibility standards, New York City Local Law 58 and the *ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) Standards for Accessible Design*, but to take into account the facts that the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) is in the process of adopting the revised *ADA-ABA (Architectural Barriers Act) Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities* and New York City is in the process of adopting the 2003 *International Building Code (IBC)* and the 2003 edition of ICC/American National Standards Institute A117.1, *Standard on Accessible and Usable Buildings and Facilities*.

In addition, because the needs of fans go beyond the gates of the ballpark—such as how public transportation serves those with disabilities while maintaining public security before and after games—representatives of public transportation and other interested parties have been attending community meetings to hear such concerns firsthand, and all suggestions offered by New York's active community of advocates for persons with disabilities on ways to make the new stadiums accommodating are being reviewed and considered, even if their inclusion would exceed existing city and federal accessibility requirements.

“One suggestion that made a lot of sense was from a wheelchair user who requires oxygen during events,” says Yankees ADA Coordinator Carol Laurenzano. “By simply adding an electrical receptacle within the wheelchair viewing location, he will be able to plug-in his medical equipment.”

Similarly, although not mandated by current city and federal accessibility requirements, many advocates requested the provision of unisex toilet rooms to facilitate the assistance of family members with disabilities. As a result, such accessible toilet rooms (which are

required by the IBC for large assembly and mercantile occupancies) will be available on all levels of both stadiums.

Ongoing Challenges

Beyond providing the increased number of wheelchair viewing locations required by Local Law 58 over the DOJ standard, wheelchair users will have lines of sight over standing spectators from viewing locations integrated throughout the seating bowls of both stadiums. However, this points out another important concern: the DOJ does not permit ticket-sellers to ask people requesting wheelchair viewing locations for proof of their disability, and ticket brokers often buy up the wheelchair viewing locations and sell them to able-bodied fans.

“Nothing is more frustrating than going to a game and seeing only able-bodied individuals in areas dedicated for wheelchair users and their families,” says long-time Yankees fan Kevin Feighery, whose daughter uses a wheelchair. “Overcoming DOJ’s self-identification restrictions while ensuring that the relatively limited number of accessible locations are available to those who need them the most is a real challenge.”

Optimizing the game experience for fans with visual disabilities is also an ongoing issue.

“Individuals who are blind or vision impaired represent roughly 10 percent of the total disabled community, and a pragmatic approach to accommodating individuals with vision impairments is to make a limited number of wheelchair accessible locations available to the blindness community,” says Council of Citizens with Low Vision International Board member Rick Morin, who is encouraging dialogue between the DOJ, stadium owners and cross-disability groups to arrive at a workable solution for all members of the disabled community.

Looking forward, even as ICC continues working with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to gain “safe harbor” recognition for the 2006 IBC, an Assembly Area Task Force comprised of representatives of the U.S. Access Board, ICC, the United Spinal Association and other disability organizations, and designers and owners of assembly areas has been formed to propose updates to the 2008 edition of the A117.1 standard and 2009 IBC consistent with the accessibility requirements of the *ADA-ABA Guidelines*. ♦

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