CC=A Citizens Coalition for Equal Access

(4)

Background Information: A General Context For H.B. 5353

General Concerns

- **GROWING NEED:** 1 out of 5 Americans have some sort of disability or mobility impairment, and the numbers will only increase as the U.S. elderly population doubles between now and the year 2050. For all these individuals, every foray into the built environment bears a measure of uncertainty or sometimes even danger because of inadequate infrastructure, maintenance, and understanding of the needs of disabled people. The 80% should take a moment to ponder the real impact on their own lives should a catastrophic event, often instantaneous, affect their lives: would they be content to be considered as part of an insignificant minority group and be assigned to the garbage can of society – an all too prevalent viewpoint.
  EXAMPLE: *When negotiating the curb in front of the Legislative Office Building (LOB), a CC=A member almost tipped over backward in his wheelchair. The curb cut was not marked in any way, and he mistakenly tried to drive over the curb. Even more importantly, within the unmarked curb cut, the transition between sidewalk and roadway was dangerously deteriorated.*

- **INADEQUACY OF ADA:** While many facilities claim to meet access codes and often do, the reality is that these codes-particularly the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA 1969) and the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA 1990)--frequently fall far short of meeting the real need. Many of the people with expertise in the ***technical requirements*** of these codes—such as architects, engineers, and public officials--do not have a deep understanding of the concrete realities of the disability experience or of the principles of Universal Design. Nor are they aware of how inexpensive many accommodations that go beyond ADA have become. We need to strengthen the ADA and ABA laws and State building codes.
  EXAMPLE: *In response to advocacy efforts by the Citizens Coalition, an automatic opening system was installed on the outside doors of 79 Elm Street. However, State officials failed to install a similar system on the* ***inside doors****, even though the additional cost would have been relatively small. Despite the admirable manifestation of good intent, this omission reveals a fundamental lack of understanding of real equal, dignified access.*

- **MAINTENANCE IS KEY:** Inadequate and/or uninformed maintenance protocols contribute to access problems as frequently as do lack of adequate standards. ***EXAMPLE:*** *At the University of Connecticut Health Center, the code compliant hallway running past the rest rooms was used as a storage place for a large cart with folding chairs, thereby reducing the turning radius into the restrooms to the point that it was difficult for a wheelchair to gain entry.*

- **NEED FOR BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE DISABILITY EXPERIENCE:** Most attempts at creating a better environment are hampered by the abled majority's ignorance of the issues faced by people with disabilities.
  EXAMPLE: *On the first floor of the LOB, the only restrooms with automatic doors are accessed through a very heavy door that is difficult to push open.*

- **NEVER A HIGH PRIORITY:** Even in times of plenty, the needs of people with disabilities are a low budget priority. This often results in a "penny wise, pound foolish" scenario in which skimping on one accommodation means that other accommodations are underutilized because the people in wheelchairs can't get to them. ***EXAMPLE:*** *See example directly above.*

Specific legislative/administrative issues

- **H.B. 5353:** A survey of state buildings needs to be completed and reported in order to identify accessibility issues and prioritize improvements, ***with input sought from people with disabilities.*** A deadline for completion of upgrades should be identified, as it is in H.B. 5353. Bonds should be issued to cover and actually carry out needed improvements.

- **STATE BUILDING CODES:** New State building codes should go beyond ADA in establishing accessibility standards in 3 key areas:
  - Entrances and exits, including ramps
  - Restrooms
  - Parking Areas

- **MAINTENANCE:** Maintenance protocols need to be reviewed and maintenance staff trained with the goal of being more proactive in identifying potential access problems to be fixed or to be avoided in the first place.