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ACCESS CURRENTS

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Board Holds Town Hall Meeting in Boston

The Access Board held its annual out-of-town meeting in Boston this year on May 28th. Structured as a town hall meeting, the day-long event featured open forums where members of the public could raise issues or questions of concern. It also included panel presentations on a variety of topics as well as an impromptu visit by Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick.

Members of the public raised a variety of topics and concerns in "open mic" sessions held in the morning and afternoon. Several speakers called attention to brick sidewalks, commonly found in the Boston area, and the problems they pose to people with mobility or vision impairments. It was noted that bricks often become uneven or loose over time, making wheelchair travel difficult and posing tripping hazards. Another subject of comment was classroom acoustics and the need for greater awareness and adoption of standards, such as the ANSI/ASA S12.60-2002, to help ensure that noise does not compromise learning by any student. A couple other attendees advised that in complying with ADA standards, pursuit of alternative designs and products as an equivalent facilitation should be made easier and less risky.

Other concerns raised included access to medical and diagnostic equipment, point-of-sales machines and self-service kiosks, continuing barriers to access in public transit systems, and the need for research on the growing variety of mobility aids now in use. In addition, the Board was urged to promptly issue guidance on new ADA standards pending from the Department of Justice once they are issued, and a speaker expressed concern about accessibility being properly incorporated into the various types of projects funded by the Recovery Act.

Panel Discussion on Design Education

A panel discussion moderated by Board Member Joseph Cirillo and Valerie Fletcher, Executive Director of the Institute for Human Centered Design, explored ways to promote education in accessible design, a subject of strong interest to the Board. Panelists included Diane Georgopoulos, former president of the Boston Society of Architects, Theodore Landsmark, President of Boston Architectural College, and Polly Welch, a former professor of architecture currently with the Massachusetts Division of Capital Asset Management. Observations made by the panel underscored the need for improving education in this area for both students and practitioners. Landsmark, who previously headed the American Collegiate Schools of Architecture, indicated that accessible or universal design is not a priority in many schools. Discussion centered on strategies for engaging and inspiring students through design competitions, leaders in the field, and programs like the American Institute of Architecture Students' "Freedom by Design" program which gives students practical experience in retrofitting homes for people with disabilities.

Panel Discussion on Museum Exhibit Design

A panel moderated by Board Member Neil Melick presented strategies and best practices for making museum exhibits universally accessible. Panelists Betty Davidson, an expert in the field, and Anna Lindgren-Streicher of the Boston Museum of Science presented information on how tactile and audible features have been integrated into various types of museum exhibits and advised that "multimodal" and "multisensory" approaches are essential for universal access. Noreen Grice of the Charles Hayden Planetarium described methods used to provide access to

planetarium shows, including a discreet captioning system, assistive listening systems, and an in-house process for easily creating tactile pictures to supplement shows. Kevin McGuire of McGuire Associates, Inc. demonstrated a three-in-one handheld device developed by WGBH that provides access to exhibits through captioning, audio description, and assistive listening.

Panel Discussion on the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board

The third panel, which was moderated Access Board members Nancy Starnes and Edward Gee, featured a presentation on the work of the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (AAB). AAB Chair Donald Lang and Myra Berloff, who serves as the Massachusetts Office on Disability's Designee to the AAB, provided an overview of the AAB which has been responsible for developing and enforcing the Massachusetts access code since its creation over 40 years ago. They noted provisions unique to the Massachusetts code and highlighted revisions made in the most recent update. They also indicated that a comprehensive review of the current edition of the code is underway in preparation for the next update. As part of this review and update, the AAB plans to revisit sections of the code that differ from other accessibility requirements, particularly those of the ADA and the Fair Housing Act.

While in Boston, the Board visited WGBH's National Center for Accessible Media, the Carroll Center for the Blind, and Acentech, Inc., an acoustical consulting firm. Board members also examined access features at the Massachusetts State House, the John Adams Courthouse, and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's transit system, and received a demonstration of the Vehicle Production Group's new MV-1 vehicle.

Board Issues Guidance on Accessible Pedestrian Signals

Product innovations and improved technologies have enhanced the accessibility of pedestrian signals now on the market. Low-volume audible signals and tactile features have been incorporated into the design of products to provide access to pedestrians with vision impairments more effectively. The industry standard, the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, includes specifications for accessible pedestrian signals which derive from recommendations developed by a former Board advisory panel, the Public Rights-of-Way Access Advisory Committee.

The Board has released new guidance on installing these types of pedestrian signals. "Common Problems Arising in the Installation of Accessible Pedestrian Signals" reviews access features of available products, including locator tones, audible and vibrotactile indicators of crossing cycles, and signal volume and explains important considerations in the placement and orientation of signal devices. The low-volume indicators of current products make proper installation essential in order for signals to be effective. The bulletin uses case studies and field evaluations to illustrate various installation 'do's and don'ts' in relation to common site conditions and factors. The publication, which includes an installation checklist, is available on the Board's website at www.access-board.gov/research/pedestrian-signals/bulletin.htm along with other resources on accessible public rights-of-way.

New Test Method for Play Surfacing under Consideration by ASTM

The Board's accessibility guidelines for play areas, in addressing playground surfaces, require compliance with a standard by the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) to determine whether surface materials are sufficiently firm and stable. The ASTM F 1951-99 standard (Standard Specification for Determination of Accessibility to Surface Systems Under and Around Playground Equipment) establishes protocols for a laboratory test procedure that simulates and measures the amount of effort that must be exerted to propel a wheelchair across the surface of a test material.

The Board, which is a member of the ASTM subcommittee that oversees this standard, recently submitted a proposal for a field test method that was cleared for balloting at an ASTM committee conference in May. The proposed test procedure specifies use of a portable device known as a rotational penetrometer to measure surface firmness and stability in the field. This device has been used in research sponsored by the Board on playground and trail surfacing. Balloting on this and other ASTM proposals will be conducted over the summer and concluded in September.

Events on Capitol Hill Call Attention to Acoustics in Classrooms

As part of "May is Better Hearing and Speech Month," the Board participated in a briefing for members of Congress and staff on the importance of improving acoustics in classrooms organized by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). Board Member Elizabeth Stewart provided an overview of the work the Board has done on this issue, including the support it provided the Acoustical Society of America (ASA) in developing standards for classroom acoustics (ANSI/ASA S12.60-2002, Acoustical Performance Criteria, Design Requirements and Guidelines for Schools). Other presenters on the panel discussed research findings on the impact of acoustics on learning by children, design strategies for enhancing sound and eliminating noise in classrooms, case studies, and the personal experiences of children with hearing loss and their parents.

On May 14th, the day before the ASHA presentation, the House of Representatives passed the "21st Century Green High-Performing Public School Facilities Act" (H.R. 2187), which would authorize \$6.4 billion in FY 2010 for the modernization, renovation, and repair of schools. The measure would fund projects to improve classrooms and other learning environments, health and safety, energy efficiency, and accessibility. It specifically recognizes use of funds for measures to reduce classroom noise as well as improvements undertaken to comply with the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act. A committee report on the bill encourages use of the ANSI/ASA S12.60-2002 standard. The bill was subsequently sent to the Senate and referred to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. Further information is available on the Library of Congress website at <http://thomas.loc.gov>.

DOJ Releases New Guide on Accessible Meetings

The Department of Justice (DOJ) recently published new ADA guidance on conducting accessible and inclusive meetings. The 28-page guide, "Accessible Information Exchange: Meeting on a Level Playing Field," covers access to meeting sites as well as presentations, printed materials and other forms of communication. Information is provided on how to evaluate the accessibility of meeting rooms, parking, routes and entrances, and restrooms. This guidance also covers the layout of meeting spaces, accessible circulation and seating, provision of printed materials in accessible formats, and making audible communication accessible through assistive listening systems, real-time captioning, and sign language interpretation. The guide is available on DOJ's website at www.ada.gov/business/accessiblemtg.htm.

EAC Releases Revised Voting System Guidelines for Comment

On June 1st the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) released for public comment revisions to its Voluntary Voting System Guidelines. The guidelines, which were originally published in 2005, are used to test the functionality, accessibility, and security of voting systems under EAC's voluntary certification program. Revisions address various provisions, including those pertaining to usability and accessibility, and recognize new software development and testing protocols and practices. Most revisions are based on recommendations from EAC's Technical Guidelines Development Committee, of which the Access Board is a member, and input from the public and stakeholders. The changes are largely incremental as EAC's goal in this round of revisions is to improve the test process for voting systems in the short term. More comprehensive revisions will be included in a complete update of the guidelines to be undertaken at a later date. The current revisions will be available for comment for 120 days. Further information, including the revised guidelines and instructions for submitting comment, is available on EAC's website at www.eac.gov.

Access Currents is a free newsletter issued by the Access Board every other month by mail and e-mail. Send questions or comments to news@access-board.gov or call (800) 872-2253 ext. 0026 (voice) or (800) 993-2822 (TTY). Mailing address: 1331 F Street, N.W., Suite 1000; Washington, D.C. 20004-1111.
