

# LUCAS COUNTY ARENA SEATING RECEIVES MIXED REVIEWS

## Downtown facility too tight for some, just fine for others

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For Roger M. Henneman, the best seat in the house at the Lucas County Arena during a recent event wasn't actually in the arena. It wasn't even a seat.

It was standing on the concourse after his original seat proved too small.

"I thought there was going to be a lot more room. ... My legs were actually touching the lady's legs next to me," said the 6-foot, 1-inch-tall Jerusalem Township resident. "I wouldn't come back. I would take the money and do something else."

Mr. Henneman, 29, who weighs 215 pounds, isn't alone in his critique of the \$105 million arena. It's been echoed in *The Blade's* letters to the editor section and by other ticket buyers, even though comfort is a subjective thing and many love the venue's padded seats.

The issue goes much deeper than whether a person fits well into a chair. It's about the delicate balance between capacity and creature comforts. It's about America's widening waistline and industry standards that may or may not be keeping up.

Despite some vocal naysayers, Tom Tingle, who was in charge of the arena project for the Kansas City, Mo., office of architectural firm HNTB, said reaction to the Lucas County Arena seats has been positive.

"I've talked to quite a few people. Most people seem to be satisfied," he said.

Greg Wiseman of Trenton, Mich., agreed. He has a ticket package for Toledo Walleye hockey games on Sundays and can compare the accommodations to the wooden chairs at the former Toledo Sports Arena. "I have plenty of legroom," he said. "This is 100 percent more comfortable than the Sports Arena."

The new seats range between 19 and 21 inches in width, and the amount of legroom - measured from seat back to seat back - is 33 inches. At the old arena, legroom was 31 inches and seat sizes ranged between 18 and 22 inches.

Compared to its downtown sibling, Fifth Third Field, the Lucas County Arena's seats are about the same (except Mud Hens fans in the club section get three more inches of legroom), before you take the arena's seat cushioning into account, which cuts a little space, according to officials.

The dimensions compare favorably with other facilities' too, including those serving bigger cities. At Nationwide Arena in Columbus and the Palace of Auburn Hills in Michigan, the seats are narrower and have less legroom. Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland has some chairs that are the same size as Toledo's facility and others that are roomier.

"We based it on industry standards," Mr. Tingle said. "It's an ongoing discussion that people are getting taller. They're getting larger. At some point those industry standards will probably start to evolve."

Decades ago, many stadiums had benches that allotted 18 inches or less per person. Since then, seats have become wider, both as a way to please customers paying more for tickets and for an American public that is



Gregg Fountaine, left, and Roger M. Henneman moved so they could stretch out during the recent Harlem Globetrotters game. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

getting bigger in general.

As of 2002, adult men and women in this country were an inch taller and 25 pounds heavier than in 1960, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Locally, 70 percent of Lucas County adults were found to be obese or overweight for their height by the 2007 Lucas County Adult Health Assessment administered by the Hospital Council of Northwest Ohio.

It's an issue that can put arena-makers in a bind. "When the building was designed, we built it to handle an average-sized person," said Steve Miller, general manager of SMG, the firm that runs the Lucas County Arena.

"Unfortunately, you can't build for a small percentage of people that don't hit the average numbers," said Joe Napoli, Walleye president and general manager, who holds the same position with the Toledo Mud Hens.

There were other considerations - including financial ones - as well in constructing a facility that can hold about 8,000.

"You want to maximize the amount of seats you can have, but you also want to have comfort," Mr. Miller said.

That's one reason the seats with drink holders are padded. Linda Powell, a Walleye season-ticket holder from North Toledo, is happy that designers chose to focus on comfort.

"I love these seats," she said. "They must have read my mind to put the cushions in."

Dale Vivirito, former executive director of the Valentine Theatre, said comfort needs to be the No. 1 concern. There can be consequences for chairs that bite into legs or don't allow enough elbow room.

"When you cram people in and they can't move their feet, it's like being on an airplane. They don't have a good time. They don't want to come back," he said. "Today, a 19-inch seat is like a torture chamber."

The Valentine's seats are at least 21 inches wide, he said.

Ward Whiting, executive director at the Stranahan Theater, concurred that it's important not to scrimp on seating. At the Stranahan, chair widths range between 19 and 22 inches and legroom ranges between 33 and 38 inches, he said.

"You realize that every single patron that comes to your facility will be seated," he said.

Mr. Miller said he's been surprised by the negative comments although he hasn't heard any personally. To help in the future, he said, customer service representatives have been instructed to relocate anyone uncomfortable with his or her chair to "accessible" seats, designed for people in wheelchairs and their companions, that are peppered throughout the facility.

"If anyone has any issues with the seat size or the depth, come to customer service," he said.

North Toledoan Kevin Rose - who is 6 feet, 4 inches tall, weighs 250 pounds, and has attended 16 Walleye games - said he's unlikely to do that, even though he finds the regular chairs too small.

"People pass you and you kind of stick out," he said. "People think, 'Oh, the big guy couldn't fit.'"

Instead, he said, he'll continue to settle for seats where "my knees are against the chair in front of me and there is no comfortable way of sitting. As soon as I sit down, the cup holders are right there."

On the other hand, Kurt Weber, a 16-year-old from Maumee, said his 6-foot, 3-inch frame didn't prevent him from being comfortable. He could think of only one drawback, and he managed to put a positive spin even on that.

"I can't really slouch," he said. "It's probably good for me."

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