

READING

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Sight lines have some seeing red

New press box obstructs views

By Peter Martin, Globe Correspondent | September 22, 2005

Fans of the Reading Memorial High School football team are having to deal with about 150 seats in the school's new football stadium that have views that are obstructed by the facility's press box. In some cases spectators are able to see either one half of the field or the other, depending on which side of the press box they are sitting.

"It's a huge press box [centered in the bleachers], cutting six, seven, rows down," said Reading School Committee member Carl McFadden. "Look to your left, and instead of seeing little Joey running into the end zone, you see this concrete press box. I don't know why they did it like this."

Reading Memorial High School redid its athletic facility as part of a \$54 million renovation and expansion of the school. The project includes two new artificial-turf fields, a renovated and expanded field house, new metal bleachers seating 2,539, and a large concrete press box. Lights, paid for with private donations, should be installed within the next two months.

Fans who watched the Reading Rockets football team christen the facility with a 26-20 win over Medford Saturday were reluctant to talk about the obstructed-view seats on the record, but McFadden said a number of fans joked with him about not being able to see the whole field.

Though the stands were not packed, as they would be during a playoff or Thanksgiving Day game, some spectators sat in compromised seats, with a triangular slice of the press box cut into sight lines on each side of the bleachers. The press box has two ground-floor storage bays, an elevator, a flight of stairs, two balconies, and four separate rooms, each with a bird's-eye view of the gridiron. The press box is used by writers from the local newspaper, a crew from the local cable access television station, and coaches from both teams who report on plays back to the sidelines.

It replaces an old wooden hut on stilts.

"There's no question, it could've been smaller," school Superintendent Patrick Schettini said Friday.

The architect who designed the renovation of the athletic facility said that space constraints of the site, sought-after upgrades, and the requirements of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act on both the stands and the press box helped lead to the size of the press box and the obstructed-view seats.

School officials have met once with the architects of the facility to discuss the situation and will meet again on Monday night during the School Committee's regular building and construction update.

School officials have already mentioned some possible mitigating measures, like renting extra stands to set up beyond the end zone to seat the large high school band, freeing up unobstructed seats in the main bleachers.

The new facility will also be used for soccer games and track meets. The track was upgraded to permit the running of state track meets at the facility but McFadden observed: "I'm skeptical that we'll be able to host state track meets, because of the lack of seeing the whole track."

School officials are disappointed that there are seats with obstructed viewing but regard it as a relatively minor problem in light of all of the project's positive results. It is also still considered an improvement on the old bleachers that started at ground level and had obstructed viewing in the bottom three rows because of standing fans and players.

"When I watched the box go up, it looked worse than it really was," said athletic director Phil Vaccaro. "I thought we were going to lose a lot more seats. But if this is the worst thing that happened in this project, we are very, very lucky."

School Committee member Pete Dahl said he was aware that there were going to be obstructed-view seats, but not this many. McFadden said that during his 3 1/2 years on the School Committee he's heard no mention of obstructed-view seats from the project manager.

"It's certainly something that would've gotten my attention," said McFadden. "It's like if you buy a car, you assume there's going to be an engine in it. Same thing with a

stadium, you assume people will be able to see the field."

School Committee vice chairwoman Elaine Webb said "There was a lot of discussion about the press box. It needed to be built to comply with the American with Disabilities Act, storage requirements, and site constraints," she said.

David Capaldo, an architect for Design Partnership of Cambridge, designed the new bleachers and press box. He would not comment on when school officials were made aware of the obstructed-view seats.

Capaldo does not regard these seats as a problem, but instead as a necessary compromise, given the site constraints and project requirements.

The bleachers had to be built within a limited amount of space, in between the playing field and a fire access road adjacent to an existing building.

The field, which was expanded to accommodate a full-size soccer pitch and eight-lane track, is bordered on one side by the Aberjona River.

Previously one bleacher was situated on each side of the old natural-grass football field, seating a total of 2,600 .

The new bleachers and press box also had to comply with the ADA, which required that the new structures be accessible to those with disabilities. The ADA required ramp access to the bleachers and an elevator to the top of the press box. It also required a sufficiently wide hallway and doors in the press box.

"If I knew it was going to be like this, I think we would've worked for some design changes," said Dahl at the game.

"You pay millions in architectural design fees, and you think you can build something better than this," said McFadden. "Hopefully something can be done about it, and the town shouldn't have to pay any more money."

Meanwhile Schettini said overall the renovations were a plus for students.

"We've done some wonderful things for students here," said Schettini. "And there may be some small things not to our liking, like the seats, but I hope residents don't wash the whole project with the same brush." ■

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