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## Settlement means revamping access to buildings

By Bill Cotterell  
Florida Capital Bureau

The Florida Capitol and dozens of downtown office buildings are in for a \$1.1 million renovation of their accessibility fixtures under a court settlement enforcing provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"It's really a good settlement, the best we could do," said Denny Wood, president of the Florida Paraplegic Association, who was plaintiff in a federal lawsuit settled by the Feb. 7 agreement. "We could have made them a much better offer, but this is a good start."

The agreement between Wood and the Department of Management Services calls for the state to make a thorough survey of ADA-compliance needs — but to get to work promptly on things it already knows are wrong. Wood, who has used a wheelchair since a 1964 construction accident, has lobbied in the Legislature and before local governing boards for many years to promote equal access for people with mobility, hearing, sight and other issues.

Wood said public restrooms in the Capitol are an immediate problem. He said "there is no side access"

See ACCESS, Page 2

## Access

From Page 1

to toilets, which are difficult for someone in a wheelchair to approach from the front, and that paper dispensers and sink boards are too high. He said Braille signage is inadequate and that some ramps and handrails are missing parts or are improperly placed.

Wood said there are ADA problems in buildings all over the state. He said, for instance, driver licensing offices and tag agencies often don't have sufficient counter space low enough for people in chairs.

Wood filed suit against the state last year to enforce ADA compliance rules in several government buildings, including the Capitol. The settlement provides that DMS will spend \$1.2 million in the current fiscal year on improvements to 60 Capitol Complex Buildings under DMS management.

It will also make compliance surveys in the 60 buildings by Oct. 30 and develop transition plans for each building by May of next year. By July 2013, DMS will survey all of its remaining buildings for ADA compliance. Other agencies under the governor's control will do surveys and

compliance plans by early May of this year.

The settlement also calls for DMS to seek \$1 million a year for continued ADA compliance, pursuant to the Capitol Accessibility Study that will be done this year. Also, by Aug. 7, DMS is required to contact privately owned office complexes in which it leases space and tell them to get in compliance with the ADA, which requires public facilities to be accessible for all.

"They have identified dozens of things that an able-bodied person would probably not notice, or consider minor," said Tom David of Homestead, who represented Wood in the case. "They were supposed to have been in compliance (in the Capitol Complex) by 1996, but it was never done."

DMS spokesman Kris Purcell said the agency is already working to address the problems, setting a schedule for making renovations and fixing things that can be handled quickly. He said every agency has an ADA coordinator, who will help with inspections and see that landlords are in compliance for state-leased facilities.

The court settlement provides state payment of a \$650 filing fee, \$1,268 in mediation costs and \$9,250 in attorney fees.