

Accessibility complaint forces location change of networking meeting By Carrie Ann Knauer, Times Staff Writer Wednesday, April 09, 2003

The Business Network meeting scheduled for 11:30 a.m. today at Fat Cat Cafe has been moved to Harry's Main Street Restaurant to accommodate a complaint that the former location is not handicapped-accessible.

Marilynn Phillips, a disability rights activist who lives in Hampstead, said she has been interested in attending the Business Network meeting because she wants to start an online business using eBay. **Phillips said she was interested in this particular meeting because Westminster City Council President Damian Halstad is scheduled to speak on his experiences in Estonia and discuss business economic development opportunities in that country.**

In a four-page letter to Halstad, Phillips claimed that Fat Cat Cafe is not accessible, that the Business Network should plan to hold its meetings at a site which is accessible, and that "the City of Westminster [would be supporting] the de facto exclusion of individuals with disabilities from public events by providing promotion and services to an organization which holds its public events at facilities which are not accessible."

Stew Warner, of Fat Cat Cafe, said Tuesday that the restaurant has a state waiver for its entrance and thus complies with the law. Warner said Fat Cat Cafe does try to accommodate its disabled customers and has tried to talk with Phillips about her complaint to the Maryland Commission on Human Relations about the restaurant's accessibility, but talks have been unsuccessful.

Joanne Frances, of the Business Network, said the group advertises its monthly meetings but seldom has new members attend unless they are friends of existing members.

"It's not that we're not trying to accommodate; it's just a quaint, almost historic home," she said of the group's choice of using Fat Cat Cafe as a meeting place.

Frances said when she heard about Phillips' letter to Halstad, she made the calls to move the meeting to Harry's Main Street Restaurant.

"We really do try to consistently support locally owned businesses," she said.

Phillips said she has never been to Harry's Main Street Restaurant, but hopes that there will not be any accessibility problems there so she can take part in the networking meeting.

"People should have in their minds that this is an issue," Phillips said.

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