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Wendy's agrees to make restaurants more accessible

By Gary Fields
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Wendy's restaurants agreed to improve access for wheelchair-bound customers at company owned or leased restaurants under a settlement Thursday with the Justice Department.

Under the agreement, Wendy's will widen or remove the zigzag lanes it uses to con-

trol customer lines but that block access by customers using wheelchairs. The settlement reflects the Justice Department's continuing aggressive enforcement of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which in the last year has been used to force movie theaters and other businesses to provide greater access to patrons in wheelchairs.

The out-of-court settlement

follows a two-year investigation by the Justice Department and attorneys general in Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

The settlement affects 1,700 restaurants in 39 states. Under the pact, the company also will pay a total of \$12,000 to the five people who originally complained about the mazes in

1994 and 1995.

Rebecca Lusk, spokeswoman for Wendy's, said the changes should be complete in 18 months. Lusk said there aren't any cost estimates yet, but "cost is somewhat immaterial. We feel like it's really important to be accessible to all of our customers. We want to make Wendy's easy to use, so they'll come back."

Attorney General Janet

Reno said the settlement is the first nationwide agreement with a fast-food restaurant chain under the Americans with Disabilities Act. The act became law in 1990.

John Wodatch, head of Justice's Disability Rights Section, said many of the restaurants inspected had access lines between 27 and 30 inches wide. He said Wendy's initially tried to address the problem by al-

lowing disabled customers to come straight to the counter without waiting in line.

However, that raised hostility among some customers in busy restaurants.

"It was patronizing," and "it flies in the face of the integration that is part of the Americans with Disabilities Act," Wodatch said.

Wodatch said Justice is investigating similar problems in

the restaurant, hotel, convenience store and retail industries. He would not specify which businesses are under investigation.

Reno said she hopes Thursday's settlement will have a major impact. "There are just so many small steps that can be taken to open up America for so many people to have access to something that most of us take for granted," she said.

CAPITAL ROUNDUP

Republicans plan \$78B tax cut bill

House Republicans are drafting a \$78 billion tax cut bill that would favor married couples, working senior citizens and people who pay for their own health insurance. GOP leaders believe tax cuts that would appeal to a broad range of constituents are one of the most potent weapons the Republicans can carry into the November elections. "We are trying to get some cooperation between the conservatives and the moderates in the Republican Party," said Rep. Sam Johnson, R-Texas, who is circulating the proposal with Rep. Nancy Johnson, R-Conn. It would boost the standard deduction for married couples filing jointly to offset the so-called marriage penalty, which has 21 million two-earner couples paying higher taxes than they would if single. The legislation would allow the self-employed and employees who must pay their own health insurance to fully deduct the premiums. The so-called Johnson & Johnson plan also would increase to \$30,000 from \$14,500 the amount that senior citizens ages 65 to 69 could earn before they lost part of their Social Security benefits. It also would extend now-expired business tax credits for research and development and prevent education and child-care tax credits from triggering payment of the alternative minimum tax for some families. House Ways and Means Chairman Bill Archer, R-Texas, says a final version of a tax cut plan will be presented when lawmakers return from the August recess. A spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., says a tax cut is "a top priority" for this session, but the size of the tax package hasn't been determined.

PAC MONEY: The eight top Republican congressional leaders have raised more than \$9.3 million for their political action committees during the current election cycle that began in January 1997. The money was collected not by their campaigns, but by PACs they use to help fund other congressional candidates. The top House GOP leaders — Speaker Newt Gingrich of Georgia, Majority Leader Dick Armey of Texas, Majority

Whip Tom DeLay of Texas and Conference Chairman John Boehner of Ohio — raised \$3.4 million for their leadership PACs, according to their reports to the Federal Election Commission. The Senate GOP chiefs — Majority Leader Trent Lott, Assistant Majority Leader Don Nickles of Oklahoma, Conference Chairman Connie Mack of Florida and Conference Secretary Paul Coverdell of Georgia — took in \$5.9 million. Only two Democratic leaders have PACs. House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt of Missouri took in \$686,485; Caucus Chairman Vic Fazio of California raised \$11,000.

POLITICS: Democratic strategists may be buoyed by an independent poll that shows no sign that Democratic voters won't go to the polls in November because they are disillusioned over the Clinton sex scandal. The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press also found Clinton's job approval steady at 62%, but 43% said he did not have the respect he needs from officials in Washington and world leaders to lead the country. The poll of 1,001 adults also showed Democrats and Republicans are closely matched in the November congressional elections, with Republicans having a slight edge among likely voters.

► New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, campaigning for Republican candidates in Iowa, said moderates like himself must play an important role in picking the next presidential candidate. "I don't think it's about me or one particular individual, said the former Reagan administration crime fighter. "It's about having the broadest possible debate."

► Robert Dornan, campaigning to regain a House seat he lost two years ago, is continuing the colorful ways he was noted for during nearly 20 years in Congress. He boasts that his campaign relies on a family brain trust he likens to "the Kennedys without the booze and the women."

► The presidential sex scandal has entered academia. Students in a legal ethics class at Washington University in St. Louis are studying whether President Clinton will lose his law license for making misleading statements under oath about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

Written from staff and wire reports

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