

New Macy's Parade route means no cutting corners

AP Associated Press

AP – FILE - In this file photo of Nov. 27, 2008, balloons float down Broadway during the Macy's Thanksgiving ...

By DEEPTI HAJELA, Associated Press Writer Deepti Hajela, Associated Press Writer – 35 mins ago

NEW YORK – It won't be just the balloons, marching bands and floats on display in the annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. The laws of physics will also be on parade.

For the first time in its more than 80-year history, the parade route is bypassing Broadway, which cuts a diagonal slice through Manhattan, as it makes its way south from the Upper West Side to the finish at Macy's flagship store in Herald Square.

Instead, participants will use a new route — one that traverses the grid of the city's streets and avenues, includes turns around five corners, and is slightly longer than in previous years.

The demands of the new route will challenge the marching bands and handlers of the parade's signature balloons, for whom precision is key, said Brian Schwartz, physics professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

"There really is a lot of science" to it, he said.

"If they're taking a new route, they're going to have to be really careful in the turning of the corners," he said.

The new 2.65-mile route came about because parts of Broadway have been closed to vehicular traffic, making it off limits to floats this year.

Macy's giant balloons, featuring Buzz Lightyear, Spider-Man, and Ronald McDonald this year, among others, measure several stories tall and wide and are filled with thousands of cubic feet of helium. Each balloon is tethered to several human handlers — the number depends on the size and shape of the balloon — who are responsible for guiding it down the route on foot.

The physics involved with moving a balloon down a straight path are different from what's needed for a corner, Schwartz said.

"If you're doing a turn, then the people on the inside of the turn have to walk slower than the people on the outside of the turn," he said. "It has to be very well-coordinated."

The handlers also have to know when to start their turning motion and how wide a turn to take, he said, likening it to trying to turn a car into a narrow parking space. If the driver turns too sharply or too widely, the car won't fit into the space properly.

Wind could also be an issue, Schwartz said, with changes in the direction of the route meaning changes in how the wind hits the balloons and what handlers have to do to compensate.



"The tension on the ropes will be changing, and people have to adjust for that in real time," he said.

The effect of the wind on the balloons is something that Macy's is mindful of, and city guidelines are in place to ground the balloons if the winds are too high.

The protocols were established after 45-mph winds drove a Cat in the Hat balloon into a metal pole during the 1997 parade and left a woman in a coma for almost a month before she recovered. The balloons were lowered to a maximum of 17 feet on a stormy Thanksgiving Day 2006.

A route with corners in it is not for the faint of heart, said Judith Matt, president of a Massachusetts nonprofit called Spirit of Springfield, which holds a big balloon parade the weekend after Thanksgiving.

"All they have to do is have some wind when you go around one of those corners," she said.

The Springfield parade changed its route more than a decade ago to one that is almost perfectly straight to avoid issues like hills, turns or trees.

It's not just the balloons. The Macy's marching bands, 10 from around the country, will have to make the turns while maintaining the precision of their marching lines.

"When you're in an event, you kind of live for it, you want to execute those turns so they are precise and crisp," said Robert Jacobs, executive director of the Jersey Surf, a drum and bugle corps based in Mount Holly, N.J.

Marchers will have to closely follow the path of the person in front of them to avoid having their band lines disrupted, and will have to time their steps carefully, since the person on the inside of the turn is taking smaller steps than the person on the outside.

"If you have to run to keep up, you're doing something wrong," said Jacobs, whose group has marched in its share of parades but is not taking part in the Macy's event.

"Corners can be the enemy of a marching band but also a source of inspiration," he said.

Orlando Veras, a spokesman for the Macy's parade, said organizers are confident the additional corners will not pose problems. Parade officials walk the route every year to assess potential problems.

Veras also pointed out that previous routes included one turn at the end, and that marchers and balloon handlers had to make a turn at the beginning to get from staging areas on side streets onto the main parade route.

If anything, the concern is timing, he said. The nationally televised event has a three-hour window, which now has to cover a longer parade route.

"The parade is such a perfectly timed machine; we like to know at 9:07 you should be at this block," he said. "It's really not about the turns, it's about the length of the route."

Observers were confident that Macy's would make it work.

"They're the epitome of what a parade does," said Toni McKay, CEO of Starbound Entertainment, which produces giant balloon parades. "They're going to be able to handle that quite well."