

## The Mummers Parade: A PPR Tradition

Much like attending the [Mummers Parade](#) is a tradition for thousands of residents in the Philadelphia region, managing the parade is an annual tradition for the staff at Philadelphia Parks & Recreation. Each February, a dozen or so PPR employees begin planning the next year's parade, while memories of the previous parade's successes and challenges are fresh in their memories.

On New Year's Day itself, around 160 Philadelphia Parks & Recreation staff members lead the parade on the street level. By their side are the representatives of nearly every other City Department—Police, Streets, Licenses & Inspections, Health, the Managing Director's Office, Public Property, Communications and the Office of Information & Technology, to name a few. The parade belongs to the Mummers, but hundreds of City staff help run it.

Believed to be the oldest folk festival in the United States, the parade has mid-17th-century roots. The first *official* parade was held on New Year's Day 1901, and Philadelphia Parks & Recreation (then the Department of Recreation) began managing the parade roughly 40 years ago. For many years, the parade structure was loose, to say the least. Parade lengths ranged from 9 hours to 13 hours. After the 2008 budget crisis in Philadelphia and financial collapse nationwide, the city was forced to end funding for the parade and reduce public employee hours dedicated to its production. Working with the Mummers, Deputy Commissioner of Programs / Parade Director Leo Dignam trimmed the parade length to 6.5 hours. Now the length only varies 20 minutes or so year to year. Dignam credits more planning, meetings and cooperation among the Mummers groups for the improvements.

To say the coordination of the Mummers Parade is complicated is an understatement. "It's like four separate parades because there are four divisions, and it's a contest for each one, so they have to be judged," explains Dignam. "So in other parades, you might get awards, but you just go do your thing and leave. In this one, they march, then they have to perform and there's three different judging stands, there's 3,000 people in the parade... it's a lot of moving parts, and it takes a lot of coordination."

After all these years, the Mummers Parade continues to evolve and change. Following the Boston Marathon bombings, Homeland Security will be on hand to ensure safety. And the parade will be a bit more diverse with the reintroduction of the Female Impersonator category and the inclusion of a Native American group from Denver. The parade will continue to be family friendly, this year with even more port-o-potties, bleachers and food vendors.

Asked for his favorite memories of past parades, Dignam says they all blur together. "The thing about the Mummers Parade is, it's your life. You go to meetings and do this all year, then you have 8 hours to experience it. Every year you learn something new." As someone who didn't know much about the Mummers prior to participating in its organization as a City employee, Dignam has grown to admire the talents of the performers overall. "There are some groups that stay up [on New Year's Eve], maintain the original [parade] purpose of partying," he says "But there are a lot of people that are very serious and



committed about the tradition of being a Mummer. The musical part of it... you can't be impaired in any way and play the kind of music and march for that long, do dance moves in between, playing saxophone. There are strong, committed, talented groups in there."

Tickets for bleacher seats near the Welcome Center (the best seats in the house, according to Dignam) are on sale now at Independence Visitors Center and the Welcome Center itself.