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## Group fights for signs of Times

By [Lisa Fickenscher](#)

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The 150 flashing signs in Times Square share more than tight real estate these days. Their owners are now part of an advocacy organization that will promote the outdoor sign industry at a time when it feels threatened by the city's plans to transform the Crossroads of the World into an urban park.

A group of advertisers, retailers and media companies with huge financial stakes in the neighborhood have formed the Times Square Advertising Coalition and plan to kick off their initiative next month during Advertising Week.

"Our agenda is to promote Times Square and to have a voice in the area," says Harry Coghlan, president of Clear Channel Spectacolor, which owns the JVC and Paramount Pictures signs as well as 13 others.

Among TSAC's chief priorities is ensuring that nothing impedes peoples' view of the attention-grabbing signs, including sun umbrellas and plants the city is considering for the pedestrian plazas.

### Rivals unite

Mr. Coghlan, chairman of TSAC, is joined by his arch-competitor, Jeffrey Katz, chief executive of Sherwood Equities Inc., which owns 1 and 2 Times Square as well as 1600 Broadway, including the rental space for 24 signs on those buildings. The executives mobilized their major advertisers and some retailers in the district. Coca-Cola, Yahoo, Toshiba and Anheuser-Busch and others have signed on with the coalition, as well as retailers like Walgreens and Olive Garden.

The idea for the group gelled in April when the city was mulling a plan to move the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade off Broadway. That's when the two executives met for the first time and joined a chorus of Times Square businesses opposed to the rerouting of the parade.

### Squeaky wheels

Their complaints resulted in a compromise. This November the parade will start on Seventh Avenue, but will continue onto West 42nd Street and Broadway before ending on Sixth Avenue. "I don't think the city understood the importance of preserving the sight lines to the signs," says Mr. Katz.

Advertisers pay millions of dollars a year to be exposed to the 356,000 people who visit the area each day—a number that jumps exponentially on Thanksgiving—not to mention the millions of television viewers who tune in to watch the parade.

### Parade as catalyst

"The immediate catalyst may have been the Macy's Day Parade situation," says Tim Tompkins, president of the Times Square Alliance and a TSAC board member. "But the bigger story is that a key industry in Times Square is becoming more formalized."

While TSAC is planning to sponsor an awards ceremony for the best signs and an economic impact study, its immediate aim is to have a say in the city's Green Light Midtown initiative. Spearheaded by Department of Transportation Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan, the pilot is moving quickly. Over Memorial Day Weekend, the pedestrian plazas sprouted after crosstown traffic in Times Square was eliminated. The experiment will last through the end of the year, when the city will evaluate the project.

Some benefits are already clear. There is more foot traffic in the area, which is generally good for retailers.

The pedestrian plazas "may turn out to be a stroke of genius," says Mr. Katz. But he also believes the project is being rushed forward.

"The city has created an enormous park in Times Square, but DOT is not a parks agency," he adds.

In the meantime, sturdier metal furniture will be arriving in a week or so to replace the much maligned temporary beach chairs. Umbrellas have been installed below West 42nd Street, but not yet in Times Square.

"There are still some discussions with the city about how many or whether the umbrellas will be brought in," says Mr. Tompkins.

A spokesman for DOT says the agency is considering the addition of umbrellas.

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