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VIRGINIA KEY

MIAMI TELLS JIMBO'S: CLEAN IT UP

A freewheeling bait shack and watering hole on Virginia Key faces a deadline to remove the junk that some say gives the place its character.

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Since 1954, at the edge of a mangrove lagoon on despoiled Virginia Key, the quirky bait shack/watering hole/gypsy camp known as Jimbo's has been ruled by one motto: Laissez faire.

Or, better yet, laissez les bon temps rouler. Let the good times roll.

But now, so far as the city of Miami is concerned, the laissez has gone faire enough.

The city has embarked on a soft-glove version of a codeenforcement crackdown on James "Jimbo" Luznar's famously tumbledown and quasi-legal palace of cheap beer, smoked fish and bocci ball.

And Jimbo and his far-flung circle of patrons, fans and acolytes question whether the old-Florida outpost, which has survived the onslaught of hurricanes, rezonings and yuppies more or less intact, can possibly survive this.

City officials stress that, contrary to growing public belief, they don't want Jimbo or his shrimp house gone so long as the man is alive.

But just about everything else around it has to go, the city says: The derelict vehicles and junked boat hulls. The old multicolored school bus, backdrop to countless fashion shoots. The faded and collapsing Bahama shacks, built circa 1980 for a sci-fi stinker, Island Claws ("Bad movie — nuclear plant radiates crab and it terrorizes city," says Jimbo's son, James "Bubba" Luznar Jr.).

And the collection of broken-down campers under the Australian pines that serve as homes for Bubba Luznar and a half dozen others who have nowhere else to live — those, too, must go, the city says.

In other words, say the Luznars and their peeved patrons, the city wants much of what makes Jimbo's Jimbo's to disappear.

"The character of the place is what's here," said Bubba Luznar, standing uneasily in front of his sagging camper, which appears rooted to the ground. "They've let it go for 40 years, and then they decide that, boom, it all needs to go?"

Picturesque, maybe, but it's also a hazard to public health and safety, city officials say of the junk Jimbo's has accumulated over the decades. They stress the city has a responsibility to clean up what is, after all, part of a public park.

The city will pay to demolish unsafe structures and tow out vehicles, boats and campers if Jimbo can't or won't. But officials say they won't touch the ramshackle bait house out of which Jimbo's serves beer and smoked fish, or push out the two occupied houseboats lashed to the adjacent seawall, even though those were banned from the city years ago.

"We don't want to hurt his business or evict him or anything like that," said city code enforcement chief Mariano Loret de Mola. "But we have a health problem out there, we have a sanitary problem, we have a trash problem that is on and off. There are people living in unsafe structures and abandoned vehicles.

"We could have an accident and the city would be liable. People have complained. And they are right. Things have to change, for the better. I hope Jimbo understands."

But Jimbo says he doesn't.

"I don't know why they're so damn worried about that place there. People love that place," Jimbo said by phone from his home in North Miami Beach, where, at 82, he now spends most of his time. "Nobody worried about it before."

THE BEGINNING

Certainly no one was overly concerned in the 1950s when Jimbo and his uncle, both shrimpers, were run off from the bayside spot where they operated to make way for The Miami Herald's present building. In exchange, the city allowed them — without a lease or any sort of written agreement — to move their shrimp boats to a secluded spot across from an odoriferous sewage-treatment plant on publicly owned Virginia Key, then considered a wasteland.

The informal understanding, city officials say, was that Jimbo and his bait house would be allowed to remain for the remainder of his life, an agreement they say they still mean to abide by.

Since then, they note, Jimbo has not paid a nickel for his use of public land.

Over the decades, the charming old shrimper, his rustic bait house and the tranquil lagoon, developed a numerous and intensely devoted following, often drawing scores of weekend visitors — many of them tourists who read about Jimbo's in travel guides or his model-decorated website,

www.jimbosplace.com.

TV's Flipper and Gentle Ben were filmed at Jimbo's lagoon. The high point came perhaps in the 1990s, when Jimbo's drew a string of big Hollywood films like True Lies, TV hits like Miami Vice and catalogue and fashion shoots. Yuppies rode in on Harleys to drink and mingle with the odd mix of models and toothless rummies.

Since then, however, as the place fell into increasing disrepair, the shoots have become rarer, the visitors less numerous. No one has gone shrimping from Shrimper's Lagoon in years. Jimbo's boat sits rotting on the water. And the bait house no longer sells live bait, though the iced beer, soda and fish — still smoked on the premises — remains good and plentiful.

With a few exceptions — an effort to impose a \$5 entry fee that was rescinded by the City Commission after a public protest, and a rezoning that was meant to but failed to draw development to the spot — the city had left Jimbo's alone.

THE CHANGES

That hands-off attitude changed for a couple of reasons, city officials say. These days, Jimbo — aging and with two artificial knees — shows up at his namesake place only on weekends.

The people he left in charge, including his son, have allowed mountains of trash to accumulate and illegal squatting to proliferate. The old film sets have moldered and are in danger of collapse.

Even some longtime fans acknowledge Jimbo's is not quite what it once was. But it's still well worth savoring, said Capt. Bob Hamilton, a trawler charter operator who brings clients by regularly.

"It was getting dumpy," Hamilton said, but added: "This place is the Last of the Mohicans, something you can't find anywhere else in Miami anymore. Everyone knows Jimbo is not going to be around forever. What's left if they clean it up? It would break Jimbo's heart. They shouldn't be pushing him in the grave."

But the conditions, the city says, are intolerable when they are trying to transform Virginia Key — now recognized as a fragile ecological treasure — into a conservation and recreational park. The city and county have sunk millions into environmental and beach restoration projects next to Jimbo's.

And though workers, friends and volunteers carried out a massive clean-up last week, removing some old painted VW bugs and carting out three dumpsters of trash that Jimbo says cost him \$2,700, city officials say it did not go far enough.

Code enforcement officials plan to visit Jimbo's, possibly as soon as next week, to tag what they want gone.

To control crowds, the city has also reimposed the \$5 Virginia Key Beach entry fee, which used to be waived if visitors said they were going to Jimbo's. The fee will be reimbursed upon exit with a stamped ticket from Jimbo's.

"We are moving forward to have a very nice environment out there," Loret de Mola said.

Jimbo Luznar says he won't object if the city removes the film-set shacks or the abandoned cars and boats. Some of it, he says, is the city's fault. People began dumping trash after the city removed nighttime security.

But he will plead with city officials to allow his son and a couple of employees to remain to safeguard the place.

“If the city goes ahead, let ‘em. I haven’t made a nickel on that place since they did that \$5 fee thing again,” he said. “But my son has to live there. I have to have a watchman there, or they would steal everything I have.”

But Luznar laments that with the shacks and the old painted cars will go the last hope of bringing back Hollywood and the models to Jimbo’s.

“The still photographers don’t come anymore,” he said. “Because there’s nothing there anymore.”



PATRICK FARRELL/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

FUN AMID THE FISH: Cold beer, smoked fish and bocci keep the regulars like Raul Esquijarosa, playing the ringtoss, coming back to Jimbo’s on Virginia Key.



PHOTOS BY PATRICK FARRELL/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

A PIECE OF OLD FLORIDA: Brian Dumars, Stu Banks and Tony Carlyle enjoy the spirit of Jimbo's on an old bus the city wants gone. At



left, Jorge Ortiz gives a wandering cat a taste of his smoked fish.