



Ryan Morrill

NO PERMITTANCE: Shack owner Chet Atkins is pursuing ways to speed up the process of obtaining construction permits for the Causeway Shack he proved ownership of last year.

At Odds Over Restoration Plan

'Causeway Shack' Future Looking Shaky at Best

By MICHAEL MOLINARO

Plans to rebuild the beloved yet dilapidated Causeway Shack on Cedar Bonnet Island have been held up for many reasons, but as owner Chet Atkins explains, it mostly comes down to money.

"People haven't stepped up to the plate," said Atkins. "There's been a lot of people huffing and puffing and talking about the Shack,

but when it really comes down to it, no one is really willing to help. I do have a group of contractors willing to do it at cost, but we're not going to pay for the cost. It's the kind of situation where everyone was asking, 'What are you going to do?' And now we know what to do, but can't do it."

Atkins is owner of Jersey Outdoor Media, a

Continued on Page 30

Shack

Continued from Page 14

company that owns the billboard immediately adjacent to the Shack. Atkins proved title of the Shack last year after several years of research and thousands of dollars in lawyer fees.

The estimated cost for the Shack's restoration is \$25,000. Donations have been made through jerseyoutdoor.com to a link for the Shack fund, though Atkins is surprised at the lack of larger donations.

This may be due to what Stafford Township Historical Society President Tim Hart once explained: less interest in the Shack by locals than by summer vacationers who see the Shack as a welcome mat back to their beach houses each year.

"I have some of the best builders in the area and architects willing to do work for free. What we need is materials: cedar shakes, treated wood, hurricane windows. Everything's got to be treated because it's right on the water. We're ready to go but we just don't seem to have much interest in it. Isn't that strange? We've done mass e-mails asking for donations for the Shack and only one major donation was made."

Atkins hopes to rebuild the Shack as it was through the '50s, '60s and '70s, when it was known as the Happy Days Gunning Shack. It would appear as old, yet rebuilt to last. Design will be based on photographs and paintings from that era.

Before materials, Atkins needs construction permits.

"We're getting very, very close to being able to pull local permits," Atkins said. "We have some laws we've been looking at that basically tell us that the Shack has been there for quite a few years. We have proof the Shack has been there quite a few years. And as far as we can tell,

we should be able to move ahead in the next few months with construction."

Atkins looks to invoke what he called "rule of law," that he said allows for a grandfather clause in which the old structure could be rebuilt exactly as it once was — no larger — without needing wetlands permits from the state Department of Environmental Protection, a construction requirement since the late 1970s.

Atkins' lawyer, Richard Shackleton, could not be reached to explain further, but Atkins did offer, "The town said it has to be owned by the town to be able to do it, and my lawyer seems to disagree."

Though it is known as the entryway landmark of Long Beach Island, the Shack is technically in Stafford Township, which Atkins claims has been dodgy when it comes to setting up meetings.

"We've been giving the town a lot of things and they don't seem to be giving anything back. We had a billboard go down during the Hurricane (Irene) and they would not let us rebuild it (due to current wetlands construction laws). We lost \$24,000 a year from that."

Atkins claims the town wants him to go through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which he pleads would be too time-consuming for the Shack that now seems to be barely standing. "It takes a long time for the government to do anything. It could take five years to get approvals and it would fall down by then.

"We have to have support. If we had support, we'd be moving by now. It can't be an endless pit of money.

"The town seems to be holding us up at this point, so we're trying to find out why. They're kind of holding off on a meeting with us. We feel the Shack can be built and the town feels that we can't build it yet for some reason, and were trying to figure out why. And they keep putting us off."

"We're not really sure what we're going to

do with it, whether it'd be a club people could go to. But we think that as long as people can see it from the outside, that's what people care about: whether they can see it or not."

"If we do it ourselves, it's not the same thing we thought we were getting into. If I'm going to spend a lot of money on it, I might as well build something for me."

Stafford Township Administrator Jim Moran denies refusing to meet with Atkins. He said if Atkins can get proper wetlands construction permits from the state, the town would be nothing but supportive.

"I've explained this multiple times," said Moran. "We've got a great relationship with Chet, and don't know what he's missing here. I can't issue a permit until those permits are acquired from the DEP and the Army Corps of Engineers. You need to be able to control everything that happens out there.

"We'd support their effort but we can't financially support it," Moran said. "We had our engineers out there at the Shack and have concluded there may be a way to work through the DEP permit processing, but you still have to get approved by the Army Corps of Engineers. It's possible, but I'd say the Army Corps is a 50/50 shot. None of that is something we're going to spend public money for. It's an expensive process. It's the same issue anybody has that wants to build anything on a coastal waterway."

Moran said an exchanging of the Shack property title has not been discussed and is not a concern of the township. One thing was assured by Moran: "There will never be anything built there other than what was exactly there before. It would never be for use. It would never be finished inside or be anything more than a monument. The only thing I could see getting permitted there would be the façade of the structure. It's not going back to being a gunning shack. (That)'s not going to happen." ❖