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Why -- for first time ever -- Bayou Boogaloo to charge admission for popular New Orleans festival

BY SUE STRACHAN | sstrachan@theadvocate.com MAY 14, 2019 - 8:30 PM

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People fill up the banks and waters of Bayou St. John during the Mid-City Bayou Boogaloo Festival presented by Postive Vibrations Foundation.

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Advocate staff photo by Eliot Kamenitz

Be prepared to pay up for Bayou Boogaloo this weekend.

For the first time in its 14-year history, the Bayou St. John music festival — known as much for the wild floating creations launched on the bayou by attendees as for its bands — will have a required entry fee when gates open this Friday.

The festival plans to charge \$10 per person or \$20 for the weekend to enter fenced-off areas close to the three stages. Children under 12 are free. Wristbands will allow attendees to move freely in and out of the festival.

Organizers hadn't planned to charge a fee this year. But Boogaloo founder and producer Jared Zeller found out about a month ago that the agreement for land use he had for the past two years with the city, a combination of cash and public service (litter abatement, for example), was going to change, with the festival being charged six times the fee that it was in 2018.

An example of the public service came Tuesday, when the festival and Friends of Bayou St. John arranged for 14 trees along Bayou St. John to be pruned, mulched and oxygenated. This was an in-kind donation from Benton Tree Service. The cost of this service would have been \$19,165.

Zeller said he tried to negotiate the fee down, hoping that more public service would help, but this past Friday he realized it would not change.

He declined to say how much the fee was in 2018, and what it is now.

City Communications Director Michael Tidwell issued a statement Tuesday night saying that "from the city's perspective, the only new element to the festival this year was a requirement that Mr. Zeller pay his fair share for the use of the public property his festival entails."

He said the city is required "to charge fair market value for any use of public land for a private purpose. City staff invited Mr. Zeller to present the public purpose served by the event to offset the fee. However, Mr. Zeller chose to pursue a different type of agreement that allows for restricting access and charging admission."

Another financial issue was that the cost of insurance doubled from 2018, though the sponsoring Friends of Bayou St. John was prepared to absorb this increase without charging admission fees. But then the land use fee was dramatically increased.

"Our goal was always to keep it free," said Zeller.

The three-day fest began as a way to bring people back to Bayou St. John after Hurricane Katrina. It was free, but it has flirted with the idea of charging admission in recent years.

Last year, a \$5 fee for people who came to the festival after 3 p.m. was publicized, then rescinded. For the past 10 years, the festival has asked for donations, and in the past few years, a "Suggested donation of \$10" sign was posted at the gates.

In 2016, organizers erected a fence before the festival along the Moss Street side of the bayou, where many people launch their boats and where a number of spectators claim spaces to listen to the music from afar. After public outcry, the fence came down. There will be no fence this year.

The 2018 festival got off to a rough and tumble start. On its first day, strong winds and rain wreaked havoc, knocking over stands and causing damage that forced Zeller to compress the event into two days. Gathering supporters,

vendors and Good Samaritans, Zeller was able to get most of festival back on its feet to open the next day.

A month later, the foundation hosted “The Lost Set: A Bayou Boogaloo Benefit” at Tipitina’s to help the festival foundation and the food and craft vendors recoup some of their losses.

Last year's festival drew nearly 20,000 attendees to the areas around Bayou St. John as well as into the water on kayaks, small boats, rafts and floating platforms. The number was affected by the storm on Friday. For 2019, organizers say that a great lineup has them expecting a strong turnout.

This year, 22 acts will perform. They include Anders Osborne, Amanda Shaw, Cowboy Mouth, Erica Falls, Little Freddie King, Debauche, Tab Benoit, the Suffers and RAM Haiti.

The funds raised at Bayou Boogaloo go to the nonprofit Friends of Bayou St. John, which produces the festival, and its nonprofit partners, Friends of the Lafitte Greenway, Saving Our Urban Landscape, New Orleans Evacuteer, 100 Black Men and the Mid-City Rotary Club.

Three-day tickets can be purchased in advance at thebayouboogaloo.com. Individual day tickets can only be purchased at the gate.

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