



## Pride Practice Facility: Mylan Park Deal Made in Secret Meeting

- ***Monongalia County Commissioners held an unscheduled “behind closed doors” meeting with WVU officials, Mylan Park board members in August of 2023.***
- ***WVU Foundation staff member was involved in the Mylan Park scheme months before it was announced.***

*Exclusive: A Vernissage Magazine Investigation – Part 1*

**M**onongalia County Commissioners held an unannounced meeting on August 28, 2023, in which commissioners discussed diverting about \$1.25 million in private contributions – donated to build WVU’s Pride of West Virginia marching band an on-campus practice facility – and using that money instead to build an artificial turf multi-purpose field at Mylan Park.

WVU Athletic Director Wren Baker and WVU Director of Local Government Relations Ron Justice participated in the meeting. Baker, Justice, and County Commissioner Sean Sikora all sit on the Mylan Park Foundation’s Board of Directors.

Records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act reveal the Mylan Park plan was initiated in early August of 2023 by College of Creative Arts Dean Keith Jackson, Creative Arts Director of Development Jennifer Jordan – who is on the staff of the WVU Foundation University Development department, and County Commission President Tom Bloom.

Bloom, Jackson, and Jordan arranged a meeting to discuss the Pride Practice Facility’s future on August 22. The meeting was scheduled – at Bloom’s suggestion – at a restaurant franchised by Mylan Park Board Member Clifford Sutherland.



*Keith Jackson*

That discussion culminated in the October announcement that WVU’s planned state-of-the-art practice facility – originally slated for the Evansdale campus – will instead consist of an artificial turf field at Mylan Park, a privately-owned recreational complex nearly five miles from the WVU campus.

Emails obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* tell an entirely different story from the public statements made by County Commissioner Tom Bloom and by WVU Foundation President and CEO Cindi Roth since the Mylan Park announcement was made. Despite repeated public denials, records show that Monongalia County commissioners and a staff member of the WVU Foundation actively participated in the scheme to assist Mylan Park gain use of the band's donated money to build an artificial turf field that the Mylan Park Foundation board has long wanted, but previously been unable to fund.

### ***A Long-Promised Dream Derailed***

Many alumni and donors contend the use of their funds at Mylan Park breaks explicit promises made in solicitations by WVU and the WVU Foundation that their contributions would be used to build the Pride Practice Facility on WVU's Evansdale Campus.

Alumni and friends of the WVU marching Band – The Pride of West Virginia – have been raising money since 2019 for a practice facility on the WVU Campus. WVU's Athletic Department gave the band the site of the former baseball stadium, Hawley Field, on which to build the facility. In March of 2021 the university issued a request for proposals to begin construction. A ceremonial groundbreaking was held that October.



*The Pride Practice Facility promised in donor solicitations*

Yet during band practice on the evening of October 19, 2023, members of the marching band were told their long-awaited practice facility would not be built on-campus after all; starting the fall of this year, the band will instead practice on a field to be built at Mylan Park with the band's donated money.

One day later, on October 20, County Commission President Tom Bloom announced the Mylan Park plan to members of WVU's Alumni Band during that group's Homecoming gathering.

Bloom, a former Pride of West Virginia drummer, had posted on the organization's social media site that alumni should expect "some exciting news" during the annual event.



*The Mylan Park field location*

But many alumni were not excited about the new plan.

Members of the Alumni Band played a significant role in raising money for the Pride Practice Facility, which is funded entirely by private donations. Some 4000 contributors have given about \$1.25 million to the project. Many contend their donations were solicited with the explicit promise that the facility would be built on the Evansdale Campus' Hawley Field site.

Numerous alumni criticized Bloom's announcement. They called use of their donations at Mylan Park – which serves as a county recreation center – a “bait-and-switch” scheme. Some angrily confronted Bloom.

Hours later, Bloom posted on the Alumni Band social page attempting, as he put it, “to try and answer some questions” about the Mylan Park move and his involvement in it.

“I was approached by WVU band office,” Bloom wrote. “In the last 4 weeks, I brokered a deal with WVU and Mylan Park.”



Tom Bloom

Later, in an online alumni chatroom, donors complained they could not get satisfactory answers from university administrators as to why the practice facility would not be built on campus, as donor solicitations promised. Contributor Aaron Dean asked Bloom: “Your initial post said you were the one to broker the deal. As an elected official... should we not be able to ask these questions to you or the Monongalia County Commission?”

Tom Bloom responded: “County Commission was never involved.”

Donor Sandy Sibray says Bloom told her the same when she spoke with him on the telephone after the announcement:

“I asked him on the phone, “Are you involved as a County Commissioner?” And he told me, “The County Commission is in no way involved in this.”

willing them to work it out...I am not involved in any manner, even though people think I am,...The County commission is not involved..Mylan Park is not under the County Commission.

Screenshot: One of Bloom's chat denials

### ***Closed Doors and Conflicting Interests***

In numerous public statements since the announcement, Tom Bloom has insisted he acted as only a ‘broker’ or go-between, not as a Monongalia County Commissioner. He has repeatedly claimed the Monongalia County Commission was not involved in the Mylan Park decision.

But documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* through the Freedom of Information Act contradict Bloom's statements.

In his initial August email to Bloom, WVU Dean Keith Jackson wrote: “Wondering if we can get together... would like to float an idea by you as County Commissioner.”

Bloom and Jackson met August 22. At Bloom's suggestion, they had lunch at the Green Turtle, a restaurant franchised by Mylan Park Foundation board director Clifford Sutherland through a limited-liability corporation. The restaurant is in a business development that is also co-owned by Sutherland.

The next week, on Monday, August 28, Bloom emailed Jackson. Under the subject heading ‘*Have a compromise,*’ Bloom wrote:

“I met today with Wren Baker, Ron Justice, and the County Commissioners. We discussed several issues and I brought up an idea about the band field being out at Mylan. Please call me... Ron and I came up with an idea that

everyone thought would be a good proposal. I am excited to talk with you. All of this was done behind closed doors.”

According to public records on file with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, WVU Athletic Director Wren Baker, WVU Director of Local Government Relations Ron Justice, and Monongalia County Commissioner Sean Sikora all sit on the board of directors of the Mylan Park Foundation. Ron Justice is currently President of the Mylan Park Foundation board.

*Left to right:*

*Mylan Park Board Directors Wren Baker, Sean Sikora, and Board President Ron Justice*



There are no records of an August 28 County Commission meeting on file in the Monongalia County Courthouse. Mondays are not advertised commission meeting days.

During the *Reports from County Commissioners* portion of the commission’s scheduled August 30 meeting, all three county commissioners briefly noted having met with the WVU Athletics Department. All fail to mention that directors of the Mylan Park Foundation or a WVU Administration official attended the meeting.

Sean Sikora, who is both a county commissioner and Mylan Park board member, reported simply, “Monday we had a meeting with the Athletic Department.” Commissioner Jeffrey Arnett reported only, “We participated with the Athletic Department in a meeting.” County Commission President Tom Bloom stated: “We did meet with WVU Athletics to discuss some future issues; and hopefully we’ll be getting back to discuss those issues.” Bloom then went on to report that earlier that week he had performed with the WVU Alumni Band at a local picnic.

The West Virginia Ethics Commission has determined that a quorum of county commissioners may meet outside of official session only so long as they do not begin deliberating toward a decision that would require official action. Otherwise, the meeting may be held to be illegal.

### ***Donors Be Damned – The WVU Foundation Connection***

After Tom Bloom’s attempt to explain his role in the Mylan Park move, dozens of band alumni replied angrily.

“How can anyone justify this obvious bait and switch?” Ann Mayle asked on the Alumni Band social site.

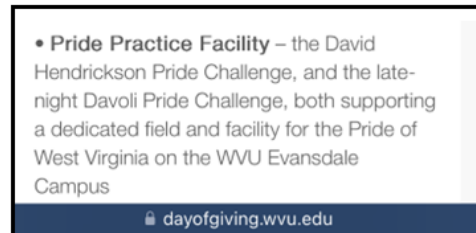
“You and every official who put this bait-and-switch together were wrong. We sold this idea to thousands of people who donated for the original plan,” Dylan Johnson wrote to Bloom, “This is disgusting.”

Mylan Park has long wanted a new artificial turf field but has not been able to finance one. After the announcement that the marching band’s funds will be used at the park, another Mylan Park Foundation director, Susan Riddle, said in a live radio interview, “We would not be able to pull the trigger on this additional multi-purpose field if it wasn’t for the band’s interest in doing so.

We've been talking about it for several years and we just have not been able to make it happen."

Many alumni, like Eric Kendall, questioned whether the Mylan Park scheme constituted a misuse of funds: "I'm genuinely curious how this doesn't go against IRS regulations regarding restricted use of donor funds. We were told this would be for a specific facility at a specific location, and gave by specifically designating funds for that purpose."

Many donors contend their donations to the Pride Practice Facility were "restricted use" contributions. Meaning, under IRS rules, the funds can be used only for the exact purpose for which they were solicited. They believe that their contributions were solicited explicitly for a practice facility on the Evansdale Campus, and using those funds at Mylan Park is, if not illegal, certainly unethical.



*WVU Foundation solicitation, March 2023*

Wrote Heather Armentrout Dyer: "Having worked with nonprofit executives on fundraising campaigns for years, this absolutely was handled wrong."

WVU's own announcement of the diversion of donor funds to Mylan Park also quotes Riddle, who, in addition to sitting on Mylan Park's Board of Directors, is also president and CEO of the local Visit Mountaineer Country Convention and Visitors Bureau. "For several years, Mylan Park has planned to build an additional (artificial) turf field." Riddle states that using the Pride of West Virginia's money to install that field will, "serve to further support the greater Morgantown area as a tourism destination."

According to the organization's website, Tom Bloom holds a seat on the Visit Mountaineer Country Convention and Visitors Bureau's Board of Directors.

"Would this be misappropriation of funds?" asked Kristen Smith in the alumni chat. "Taking funds for a specific project and putting them towards something else."

Faced with increasing criticism, the WVU Foundation, which is legally responsible for proper stewardship of the band's donated funds, issued an official statement:

"On behalf of the WVU College of Creative Arts, the Foundation commenced fundraising efforts to support the construction of a much-needed practice facility for the WVU Marching Band approximately four years ago. At that time, the Foundation was informed by WVU that the facility would be constructed at the former WVU baseball complex known as 'Hawley Field', and the Foundation conducted its fundraising efforts accordingly. Recently, we were informed that WVU has determined to construct its practice facility at a location other than Hawley Field."

On November 3, 2023, WVU Foundation President and CEO Cindi Roth wrote in a letter responding to a *Vernissage Magazine* inquiry about the use of the Pride's monies at Mylan Park, "The Foundation played no role in the decision to locate the practice facility at any particular location."

Records, obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* through the Freedom of Information Act, conflict with those statements.

Emails show that a staff member of the WVU Foundation's University Development office was involved in the scheme to use Pride Practice Facility funds at Mylan Park as early as the summer of 2023.

The documents also show that the WVU Foundation continued soliciting contributions for an on-campus practice facility even as that staff member was involved in the design and planning of an artificial turf field to be built Mylan Park with those donations.

In his August 9 email scheduling a meeting with County Commission President Tom Bloom, College of Creative Arts Dean Keith Jackson wrote: "I would be including (in our meeting) Director of Development, Jennifer Jordan."

Jennifer Jordan oversees funding for the College of Creative Arts, which includes The Pride of West Virginia marching band. Jordan is listed in the WVU Foundation staff directory as a Director of Development in the WVU Foundation's University Development office.

Documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* show that Jordan was involved through the autumn of 2023 in assisting Mylan Park with planning construction of an artificial turf field to be financed with the Pride of West Virginia's donor funds. Jordan was invited to attend the August 22 meeting with Bloom and Jackson. Jordan was also part of ongoing planning discussions with Mylan Park board members Ron Justice, Mark Nesselroad, and Leah Summers, as well as Monongalia County Commission President Tom Bloom.

In an October 3 email, Bloom includes Jordan as a primary addressee in a discussion about drone videos of the Mylan Park field location, and how the videos could be used to solicit additional donor contributions: "My purpose is to show where the new... field will be situated," Bloom writes, "a different perspective for fundraising."

In another email, WVU Director of Bands Scott Tobias engages in discussion with Bloom and Mylan Park board members about the band's practice requirements:

"I've attached a document with information about facility needs," Tobias writes.

Bloom then requests, "Could you put Jennifer in this email."

Dean Keith Jackson links Jordan into the discussion: "Looping in Jennifer," he writes.

The planning discussion continues, with WVU Foundation staffer Jennifer Jordan included.

At about the same time, the WVU Foundation sent Jackson another email. It's a copy of a donor solicitation being released in his name. The solicitation reads:



*Cindi Roth*

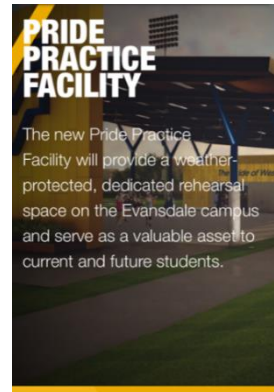


*Jennifer Jordan*

“Almost 4000 donors have invested more than \$1 million dollars towards building a home for the WVU Marching Band. The Pride of WV appreciates your support as we work to raise another \$5 million dollars...”

The pitch is followed by a link directing donors to the WVU Foundation’s Pride Practice Facility fund. That website explicitly stated that contributions would go toward an on-campus Pride Practice Facility, even though University Development’s Jordan was at the time actively working to use those gifts to benefit Mylan Park.

The emails obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* show that, contrary to Roth’s assertions, other WVU Foundation staff members were also involved in the Mylan Park plan prior to its announcement. Among those who documents show were aware of the scheme prior to its announcement are WVU Foundation Director of Communications and Marketing Garrett Cullen and Communications Specialist Cassie Rice.



WVU solicitation webpage

Confronted with complaints about the possible misuse of donor funds, WVU Foundation President and CEO Cindi Roth has consistently claimed that the Foundation “played no role” in the Pride Practice Facility’s funds being used at Mylan Park.

The Foundation has repeatedly told media representatives inquiring about the Pride Practice Facility: “None of the Foundation’s fundraising activities have been conducted under false pretenses.”

In response to questions submitted by *Vernissage Magazine* about Jordan’s involvement in the Mylan Park scheme, a WVU Foundation spokesperson replied: “No Foundation officers or employees were involved in the discussions from summer to late autumn 2023 regarding the WVU Marching Band Practice Facility moving from the planned Hawley Field location.”

In the case of Jordan, that assertion rests on a technicality: Jordan was hired by the WVU College of Creative Arts, rather than the WVU Foundation. However, Jordan’s name, photo, and contact information are listed in the WVU Foundation staff directory, alongside 22 other staff members of the Foundation’s University Development department who direct funding efforts for university divisions through the WVU Foundation.

Garrett Cullen and Cassie Rice are listed as staff members of the Foundation’s Communications and Donor Engagement department in that same directory. According to a WVU Foundation email obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, Cullen and Rice were involved in communications initiatives prior to the Mylan Park announcement. “There was a question,” a WVU Foundation VP wrote to Jordan, “about whether announcing the (band’s) Macy’s Parade funding opportunity should be mentioned alongside (the Mylan Park announcement). I know that Garrett and Cassie were contacted earlier...”



Garrett Cullen



Cassie Rice

WVU Foundation President and CEO Roth refused to answer *Vernissage Magazine's* question asking why donors to the Pride Practice Facility Fund have never been officially notified about – or their permission sought for – the redirected use of their contributions, as IRS regulations appear to require. Roth, and other WVU Foundation officers, also refused to answer the question of how building a multi-purpose athletic field for the benefit of the Mylan Park Foundation could be considered a legal and ethical use of funds that were explicitly solicited for a Pride Practice Facility on the WVU campus.

University Development Director Jennifer Jordan failed to respond to questions from *Vernissage Magazine*, or to the opportunity to comment on the content of this article.

Roth and other officers of the WVU Foundation have declined to explain how it could be possible that Jordan, Cullen, and Rice should be involved in the Mylan Park scheme prior its announcement, while other Foundation officers supposedly remained unaware. The WVU Foundation also failed to respond to the question of how, if true, that kind of disconnect within the Foundation might affect donor confidence in whether Foundation officers have the capacity to properly maintain fiduciary responsibility for donor contributions, or the WVU Foundation's \$2.8 billion in assets.

The WVU Foundation statement to *Vernissage Magazine* concludes: "Upon being informed in October 2023 of the potential relocation of the facility, and the subsequent concerns expressed by donors, the Foundation requested our University colleagues provide further context regarding the decision. Further questions about the location of the practice facility should be directed to the University."

Through a university spokesperson, Jackson, Justice, Baker, and a number of other WVU employees declined to answer questions or to comment on the content of this article. Specifically, Dean Keith Jackson refused to respond to questions asking why he initiated the scheme to move the Pride Practice Facility off the WVU campus, where numerous solicitations promised it would be built, or why he first contacted County Commission President Tom Bloom.

Tom Bloom failed to respond to a list of questions from *Vernissage Magazine*, or to take the opportunity of an offer to comment on the content of this article.

### **In the next *Vernissage Magazine* article:**

- ***The Mylan Park announcement backfires. Keith Jackson urges calling in "big PR guns."***
- ***County Commission President Tom Bloom calls constituents who complain about the redirection of their donations, "entitled Karens."***



[The Pride and Prevarication - Part 1 - The Secret Deal](#) ©

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