



Pride Practice Facility: Mylan Park Announcement Misfires

- *WVU Foundation VP questions the use of donor funds at Mylan Park.*
- *County Commissioner Tom Bloom calls concerned donors, "entitled Karens."*

Exclusive: A Vernissage Magazine Investigation – Part 2

West Virginia University administrators, Monongalia County Commissioners, and a WVU Foundation staff member conspired to divert approximately \$1.25 million in donations to build an artificial turf football field at the privately-owned recreation facility Mylan Park. Those contributions were solicited explicitly for construction of an on-campus practice facility for WVU's 'Pride of West Virginia' marching band.

Documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act reveal the machinations leading to the move were initiated in August of 2023 by Dean of WVU's College of Creative Arts Keith Jackson, Creative Arts Director of Development Jennifer Jordan – a WVU Foundation University Development department staff member, and County Commission President Tom Bloom, who is a marching band alumnus.

The scheme remained undisclosed for months. During that time, the College of Creative Arts and the WVU Foundation continued soliciting donations for the originally planned facility, promising it would be built on WVU's Evansdale campus.

The arrangement with Mylan Park was first announced on October 19, 2023 to Pride of West Virginia band members, who were told during their evening band practice that starting in 2024 they will rehearse at Mylan Park.

Documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* show that it took all of thirty-seven minutes for fallout from that announcement to begin.

At 5:37 pm on October 19, under the heading '*High Importance*', WVU Foundation Associate Vice President Jessica Lunken – apparently kept unaware of the Mylan Park scheme – fired off an email to Dean Jackson and the Foundation's University Development office's Jordan. The bold and italicized emphasis in the following is Lunken's own, as written in the original:

"I am just learning about the new partnership regarding the Pride Facility and its announcement today at 5pm...

My most immediate concern is ***how are the donors who gave to the previously proposed space (which "broke ground" on October 23, 2021) and are learning about this new partnership with Mylan (going to feel)?***

Were those donors contacted in advance? If not, what is the plan? I want to understand (the) plans or proposed plans as to how these donors to the previous Facility will be addressed... I want to make sure... that it doesn't backfire."

Lunken's concern is valid.

In an analysis of the proper use of donor funds, the Foundation Group – a nationwide organization that assists non-profits adhere to legal compliance – notes:

"If a situation arises that is serious enough to necessitate re-purposing of restricted funds (meaning funds donated for a specific purpose), it is necessary to obtain permission from the original donor(s)... That is the only legal way to use the money for purposes other than the original restriction."

Vernissage Magazine asked WVU Foundation CEO Cindi Roth why, once the plan to use the Pride Practice Facility Fund at Mylan Park became public, donors to the band's Pride Practice Facility Fund were not notified and asked permission for the use of their contributions at Mylan Park? Roth did not respond to the question.

On October 20, 2023 County Commission President Tom Bloom took to the podium to publicly announce the Mylan Park move at the WVU Alumni Band organization's Homecoming gathering. It started a firestorm.

Bloom, a former Pride of West Virginia drummer, had been promoting "exciting news" upcoming at the event on the group's social media site. But upon hearing the news, many Alumni Band members were upset.

"Bait and Switch"

Marching band alumni played a significant role in raising contributions for the Pride Practice Facility, which is entirely funded by private donations. Many contend their donations were solicited with the promise that the facility would be built on-campus. Numerous solicitations – as the WVU Foundation's Lunken noted in her email – stated explicitly that the Pride Practice Facility would be constructed on the Evansdale Campus site of WVU's former baseball stadium, Hawley Field.



Jessica Lunken

Many alumni and donors criticized Bloom's announcement. They called using their donations to build a football field at Mylan Park – a privately-owned recreational complex which serves as a community athletic center – a "bait-and-switch" scheme.

“This is not the project that I donated to,” wrote Mark Dean in an Alumni Band chat, “I’m a bit miffed at the bait-and-switch. I find it suspect that a county commissioner brokered a “deal” for alumni-donated money to go toward a county project...”



Portfolio images from the firm that designed the promised on-campus facility. The firm states that it, “transformed a defunct baseball field into a state-of-the-art band practice and equipment storage facility.” These illustrations were used by the University and WVU Foundation to solicit donor contributions, and clearly show the Pride Practice Facility located on WVU’s Evansdale campus, near the University Coliseum. The firm’s portfolio states: “We conceptualized the design and created marketing materials to assist the University in seeking project funding.”

Bloom’s subsequent attempts to explain his actions on the Alumni Band social media site met with such anger that the group’s administrator deleted the initial comment threads.

“I think all but two of the posts about the field have been removed,” wrote site administrator Jerry Clark. “Name calling and accusing people of malfeasance will not be tolerated.”

But the conflagration continued in a private alumni chat room. Donors accused Bloom and the university of betraying both the intent of their donations and The Pride of West Virginia.

The next day, Saturday, October 21, WVU’s Keith Jackson emailed Bloom. Under the heading ‘Regroup’ Jackson wrote: “Sorry you are getting beat up over this.”

In response, Bloom admitted to “losing his cool” with some who questioned the legality of using the band’s donations at Mylan Park: “...as soon as they throw out legal action,” he wrote, “I get mad.”

Calling in the Big Dogs

The next day, Jackson emailed Bloom again: “I just wrote to Maryanne, Kreider, Cindi Roth, and BJ Davisson. Looking to get the biggest dogs together for guidance.”

Records reveal that within days of the Mylan Park announcement some alumni began contacting the WVU Foundation, asking for their money back.

One donor, whose name was redacted by WVU’s Freedom of Information office, wrote: “This significant change in the project’s location feels inconsistent with the initial proposal and vision that was communicated to donors. To many, including me, this feels like a bait and switch...”



Keith Jackson

Another wrote: “I feel like we’ve been duped. You promised the band a facility on campus and all your requests for money were for that facility.”

“The Biggest Dogs.” Keith Jackson sought their guidance for damage control when the Mylan Park scheme backfired:

Left to right: WVU Provost Maryanne Reed; Vice Provost Paul Kreider; WVU Foundation President & CEO Cindi Roth; WVU Foundation Chief Development Officer BJ Davisson II



Documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* show the WVU Foundation and the University circling wagons after the Mylan Park announcement, crafting statements to fend off allegations of fraud and deceptive practices.

In response to donor complaints, WVU Foundation President and CEO Cindi Roth claimed: “The Foundation played no role in the decision to locate the practice facility at any particular location.”

WVU Foundation representative Andrea Hasley sent an email to Foundation Executive VP and Chief Development Officer BJ Davisson – one of the ‘biggest dogs’ that Jackson sought to engage for public relations assistance – and to Jennifer Jordan, the Foundation University Development Director who helped initiate the scheme to use Pride donor funds at Mylan Park: “Just got off the phone with [name redacted],” Hasley writes. “I ‘beta tested’ some of the talking points and he was quite receptive... “

When asked, the WVU Foundation refused to share those talking points with *Vernissage Magazine*.

As recently as late December, the WVU Foundation was responding to media inquiries about the Mylan Park plan with the official statement, “None of the Foundation’s fundraising activities have been conducted under false pretenses.”

But documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show that WVU Foundation College of Creative Arts Development Director



The Mylan Park marching band practice field location

Jennifer Jordan was directly involved in the scheme to use the Foundation's Pride Practice Facility fund at Mylan Park long before the move was publicly announced. The Foundation directory lists Jordan as a WVU Foundation University Development staff member. Documents also show that at least two other Foundation staff members were aware of the Mylan Park scheme before it was announced.

"They Are Entitled Karens..."

Many donors continued challenging what they considered misuse of their contributions. Discussions raged in private chatrooms. Bloom, a member of the Alumni Band, accessed and monitored the chatter, engaging some concerned members. As the conflagration continued, he emailed WVU's Jackson: "I wanted to copy my private conversation with Taylor Hall. Since she is making up anything she can to stop this project."

Taylor Hall is a Morgantown resident and alumna of the Pride of West Virginia marching band. She donated to the Pride Practice Facility fund.

In a lengthy exchange, Hall said to Bloom, "There are serious legal issues with this... a lot of people feel like they were lied to and deceived, myself among them."

Bloom told Hall: "The Pride is paying for the new (Mylan Park) field... you can complain all you want."

Bloom emailed a copy of the entire chat to Jackson, writing: "Most of the complainers... believe they gave for a ...(band) field... located on the Evansdale campus."

Bloom makes a recommendation:

"My suggestion is to look at several of the major instigators and look how much money they actually gave."

Then, County Commissioner Tom Bloom writes of those, like Hall and others contending their donations are being misused, "They are entitled Karens."

"We are finding the same traits and instigators," Jackson replies. "We have been tracking the giving records... the complainers are all in the smaller category."

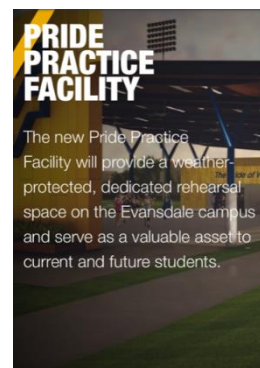
Jackson then tells Bloom, "We had been in discussion with major donors since our first meeting with you." That first meeting was in August of 2023.

Yet, for months after August, WVU's College of Creative Arts marching band website continued soliciting donations for the originally-planned Pride Practice Facility, stating the facility would be, "dedicated rehearsal space on the Evansdale Campus." The web page was illustrated with eight architectural renderings of the proposed state-of-the-art facility, all of which depict the complex located on the Evansdale Campus.

A button marked, 'Make a Gift Now' linked directly to the WVU Foundation, where donations were accepted. That WVU web page was



Tom Bloom



WVU solicitation website

still active the week *after* the university announced that contributions would instead be used to build a multi-purpose field at Mylan Park.

According to records obtained by *Vernissage Magazine*, around 4,000 donors contributed to the Pride Practice Facility Fund, many with the understanding that their donations would be used to build the band a practice facility on the Evansdale Campus.

Most were not ‘major donors.’

“An Enormous Level of Arrogance.”

“Why should that matter?” asked Taylor Hall – now married with the last name of Kinney – when contacted by *Vernissage Magazine*. *Vernissage* asked Kinney’s thoughts about Jackson and Bloom critiquing the size of contributions made by those opposed to the Mylan Park plan. “Thousands of people from across all generations and walks of life gave what they could to support the Pride. It’s ludicrous. We may be smaller donors; but everyone who donated should be respected.”

Many donors were like the individual who sent the following email to Jackson after learning of the Mylan Park plan. The donor’s name was redacted by the WVU Freedom of Information Office. But the sentiment is clear:

“My brother and I donated in honor of my dad. We were assured of (The Pride Practice Facility) being on the Evansdale Campus, and had pictures of what it would look like. It wasn’t a ton of money, but what we could comfortably do...”

Wrote another donor:

“I forked over more than \$500 over several years looking forward to the day (that the Pride of West Virginia Practice Facility) became a reality. I am disappointed and disheartened...”

Vernissage Magazine asked Keith Jackson and Tom Bloom why the size of a donor’s contribution should make a difference in the value of their opinion. Both Jackson and Bloom refused to respond to the question.

Contacted by *Vernissage*, Sandy Sibray, former band member who today is a social worker, said: “I gave what I could afford. That’s what all of us did. That makes me a lesser person? What level of donation do I need to make before I’m considered a worthy alumna?” she asked. “The WVU Foundation isn’t shy about sending me requests for contributions, but apparently that’s not good enough for Keith Jackson. He’s diminishing the gifts of thousands of alumni. Which tells me he doesn’t care about us. That’s an enormous level of arrogance.”

Vernissage Magazine asked WVU Foundation President and CEO Cindi Roth why, once the plan to use the Pride Practice Facility Fund at Mylan Park became public, donors to the band’s fund were not notified of the diversion of their contributions to the Mylan Park site and given the option of granting their permission to allow use of their donations at Mylan Park or requesting a refund. Roth did not respond.

Employees of West Virginia University, through a university spokesperson, refused to answer questions for this article, or to comment on its content.

Tom Bloom did not respond to questions for this article, or to an offer comment on its content.

In the next *Vernissage Magazine* article:

- *WVU's Director of Bands calls band members who share concerns about the Mylan Park practice site, "an embarrassment to their school."*
- *Students of the Pride of West Virginia are forbidden from speaking out.*



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