



Pride Practice Facility: Whose Field Is It?

- ***Mylan Park Director says: "With the dollars the Pride has raised, we could install another field."***
- ***"We will go from one multi-purpose field to two multi-purpose fields," Mylan Park official declares after the deal is cut: "It's a game-changer for us."***

Exclusive – a Vernissage Magazine Investigation – Part 4

There is a turf war in West Virginia. An artificial turf war.

In the summer of 2023, Mylan Park was in danger of losing.

Mylan Park bills itself, 'West Virginia's Premiere Recreation, Sport, Social, Health and Wellness Complex.' The local convention and visitors bureau boasts that the Mylan Park is a "recreational crown jewel."

Youth and amateur sports are big business; it's a \$19.2 billion dollar industry grown steadily over the last two decades, pumping millions into the economies of host sites. Communities across West Virginia are building complexes to lure athletic events.

To stay ahead of competition, like Wheeling's new *Highlands Sport Complex*, *The Bridges* in Bridgeport, and Charleston's *Shawnee Sports Complex*, Mylan Park officials planned upgrades.

The Mylan Park Foundation's goal is for their SportsPlex complex to attract high school playoffs and other major regional sporting events.

But the Mylan Park Foundation board had a problem: They couldn't find a way to pay for a second artificial turf multi-purpose field. And to compete at that highest-level, Mylan Park needs one.



Mylan Park

Then, last year, Mercer County, W.Va. announced the development of its own *Ridges SportPlex*. The Ridges complex will dwarf Mylan Park. It will, developers boast, "draw elite tournaments and tourists from all over."

On August 6, 2023, West Virginia’s legislature approved a special tax district to fund the *Ridges SportsPlex*. The legislative summary notes that the \$100 million *Ridges* project includes two multipurpose artificial turf football fields.

A Secret Deal for a Field

Emails obtained through the Freedom of Information Act by *Vernissage Magazine* show that two weeks after that vote, Monongalia County Commission President Tom Bloom met with WVU’s Dean Keith Jackson and College of Creative Arts Director of Development Jennifer Jordan, who is on the staff of WVU Foundation’s University Development office, to discuss moving the location of WVU’s promised Pride of West Virginia marching band practice facility.

On August 28, 2023, Mylan Park board members, WVU administrators, and Monongalia County Commissioners gathered in an unannounced meeting. Records obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* show they discussed taking approximately \$1.25 million in private donations – specifically solicited to build the WVU marching band a state-of-the-art on-campus practice facility – and use those funds to build a new artificial turf field at Mylan Park. In an email written that same day – obtained by *Vernissage* through the Freedom of Information Act – County Commission President Tom Bloom writes, “All of this was done behind-closed-doors.”

Few individuals involved in the Mylan Park scheme have publicly commented. Those who have – like WVU Foundation President and CEO Cindy Roth and County Commission President Tom Bloom – have made statements that directly conflict with WVU documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine*.

Bloom and Roth have repeatedly claimed that their respective organizations played no role moving the band’s field to Mylan Park. Records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show otherwise. Other university records reveal that the reasons given to the public and the media by Bloom, Roth, and Jackson for not building the Pride Practice Facility on-campus, as promised in donor solicitation, are dubious.



Cindi Roth

Tom Bloom

Keith Jackson

Many donors call the use of their contributions at Mylan Park a “bait-and-switch” scheme. They wonder if they’ve been scammed, their donations diverted only to build Mylan Park its long-planned, multipurpose artificial turf football field.

Examination of public records and of documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act suggests those claims may be valid.

No Justice for the Band

Prior to the announcement of the Pride Practice Facility’s move, the state of West Virginia gave the Mylan Park Foundation \$3.5 million to improve its athletic complex. The grant provided funds to install artificial turf on baseball diamonds, but did not include money for the foundation’s desired second artificial turf football field.

The president of the Mylan Park Foundation, Ron Justice, appeared on a local talk show to discuss that grant. While Justice is President of Mylan Park's Board of Directors, he is employed as West Virginia University's Director of Local Government Relations. Records obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* show Justice was among those who participated in the behind-closed-doors August meeting in which using the Pride's funds at Mylan Park was discussed.

The talk show host asked if those in charge of Mylan Park had other plans upcoming. Justice responded by noting the importance of Mylan Park having another artificial turf field, and he said: "We're also seeing another opportunity, and I can't let the cat out of the bag too quick, but to potentially realize that additional field in the near future."

That 'opportunity', Justice added, would put Mylan Park: "On par with anything else in the state."



Ron Justice

One week later, WVU announced that the Pride of West Virginia's Practice Facility funds would be used to build an artificial turf field at Mylan Park.

After that announcement, with donors expressing anger over the scheme, another Mylan Park Foundation board member took to the air to try to quell controversy. Like Ron Justice, board member Susan Riddle wears two hats. While she sits on the Mylan Park board of directors, she is also President and CEO of the local Mountaineer Country Convention and Visitors Bureau. Riddle was billed as being on the radio show to talk about, "a partnership with the WVU Marching Band and a new facility at the park."

But in a meandering interview, Riddle spoke little about the Pride of West Virginia, and a lot about Mylan Park getting a new artificial turf multi-purpose field.

Riddle Me This: Whose Field is it?

"Mylan Park's always been an opportunistic group," Riddle said. "We're quite creative thinkers."

Mylan Park, Riddle said in her interview, is, "a major, major tourism driver... from a tourism perspective this (new artificial turf field) is another opportunity."

Through use of the Pride of West Virginia's money, Riddle boasted, "We will go from one multipurpose field to two multipurpose fields. It's a gamechanger for us."



Susan Riddle

Riddle claimed Mylan Park was approached about moving the band field: "Like, hey, you know, I know you've been trying to put another field in."

When, weeks earlier, Ron Justice was interviewed about park upgrades, he said: "I have to give a lot of kudos to Susan Riddle and her staff." He then added: "Certainly we've had the support of the County Commission."

Riddle does not say who approached Mylan Park about using the marching band's practice facility funds. Bloom has admitted to "brokering" the deal. According to the organization's

website, County Commissioner Tom Bloom is a member of Susan Riddle's Mountaineer Country Convention and Visitors Bureau Board of Directors.

The records obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* show that Bloom was also in the August 28, 2023 behind-closed-doors meeting when county commissioners met with Justice and other Mylan Park board members. In those records, Bloom states that he "brought up the idea about the band field being out at Mylan." He also says, "Ron (Justice) and I came up with a proposal that everyone thought would be a good idea."

But the announcement of the plan to use The Pride's \$1.25 million in private donations at Mylan Park misfired. Many donors expressed outrage over the redirection of contributions from their intended use. In an October 25, 2023, email to WVU's Keith Jackson, obtained by *Vernissage Magazine*, Bloom expresses his anger about burgeoning donor displeasure. He accuses WVU officials of public relations missteps. In the email he points out that Riddle went "on the radio promoting the project" in an attempt to boost support for the Mylan plan.

Under the heading, 'Concern of Band Field,' Bloom writes to Jackson: "We have an obligation to Mylan Park."

Many alumni and donors wonder what happened to the obligation they believe that the university and the WVU Foundation have to The Pride of West Virginia marching band, whose members were promised the on-campus, state-of-the-art practice facility for which contributions were solicited.

"People feel they're being lied to," wrote donor one donor in an alumni chatroom.

"Bells and whistles..."

As donors learned more information about the planned field at Mylan Park, the less it sounded to them like their money is being used for a legitimate marching band practice facility.

For instance, they learned that the field at Mylan Park will not be built with lights.

Confronted in a band alumni chatroom, Tom Bloom wrote: "To answer the question about lights, they are in Phase 2. However, the field next to the new field will have lights and will be used if needed by the band." For "Phase 2", the band is expected to come up with additional contributions.

Bloom's statement has donors wondering: if Mylan Park is building a real practice field for the Pride, why would the marching band have to move to a different field when autumn darkness falls early during rehearsals?

"We're being told," a donor commented, "that Mylan Park won't have lighting until Phase 2. Which is an indefinite timeline. And now the plan is to use a completely separate field when they need lights. How is this, in any way, close to the original plan?"

Contrary to Bloom's claim that stadium lights were not included in Phase 1 of the promised Pride Practice Facility plan, West Virginia University records show that lighting was incorporated in the first phase of the project as it was presented to donors. WVU's 2021 'Request for Proposals' for the on-campus WVU Marching Band Practice Facility, reads: "WVU has secured enough funds to construct Phase 1 of the project, which includes the practice field, with lights and band tower. The band tower will be relocated from its current location."



The Pride Practice Facility promised in donor solicitations

Yet, Riddle – in her attempt to talk up the Mylan Park project on the radio – tried to paint The Pride getting only a field as a 'win' for the band: "(It's) a field," she said, "that they've been trying to secure for some time. And they don't have to wait till they raise all the money. They can begin the project with what they have raised so far. And it'll be done probably in phases, because, you know, the cost of a field with lights, without lights, you know, those kinds of bells and whistles keep adding additional things, whether it's relocating the actual (director's) tower that they use now for their practices, or building additional storage onto it, whatever..."

Riddle addressed donor assertions of misappropriation of their contributions to benefit Mylan Park: "In today's world," she said, "people want to criticize when something doesn't go exactly the way they might envision it."



The site at Mylan Park where the WVU Foundation intends to use The Pride's donor funds.

Many alumni who contributed to build an on-campus, state-of-the-art Pride Practice Facility are incensed.

"It seems like they are just throwing shit against the wall and hoping that it will stick," wrote alumni Shaun Moyers. "Seems shady as hell."

A Field for High School Tournaments

Documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* suggest the Mylan Park Foundation may have never intended to build the Pride of West Virginia a true college marching band practice facility.

From August through October, Mylan Park officials worked with WVU administrators, County Commissioner Tom Bloom, and a staff member of the WVU Foundation on plans for the Mylan Park artificial turf field.

Mylan Park officials sent field schematics to WVU's Keith Jackson. But there was a problem. Director of Bands Scott Tobias sent an email to Bloom and Mylan Park board members Ron Justice, Mark Nesselroad, and Leah Summers: "Keith shared the sample plans with me," Tobias wrote. "In the drawing of the football field, high school hashes are shown... we would need NCAA college hashes on the field."

In the Alumni Band chat, one Pride donor wrote what many band alumni fear: "This is a Mylan Park field that the band can use. Which is a lot different from a WVU Band facility... we just donated money to save Mylan Park from having to pay for a project they already planned."

During Susan Riddle's talk show appearance, the host noted: "It's going to be a full-size football field for the band to practice on. But you can't practice 24-7, 365 days a year... that's going to be another field that's available in the park."

Riddle agreed, stating: "Honestly, we would not be able to pull the trigger on this additional multi-purpose field if it wasn't for the band. We've been talking about it for several years and we just have not been able to make it happen... It's really, truly a gamechanger for us."

"This feels less like a partnership and more like the alumni and donors funding a Mylan Park athletic field," one upset donor commented. "This is no longer a matter of changing location, it's a fraudulent reallocation of donors' money."

Susan Riddle and Tom Bloom did not respond to *Vernissage Magazine* questions or requests for comments on the content of this article.

WVU Foundation President and CEO Cindi Roth and other WVU Foundation officers also refused to answer questions from *Vernissage*. A WVU Foundation spokesperson responded: "No Foundation officers or employees were involved in the discussions... regarding the WVU Marching Band Practice Facility moving from the planned Hawley Field location. 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."

Ron Justice, Keith Jackson, Scott Tobias and other WVU employees, through a university spokesperson, declined to answer questions or comment on the content of this article.

In the next *Vernissage Magazine* article:

- ***County Commissioner Tom Bloom attempts a late-night explanation of the Mylan Park scheme.***
- ***Donors and alumni: "The answers just raised more questions..."***



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