



Pride Practice Facility: Commissioner’s Answers Raise More Questions

- *The County Commissioner behind the Mylan Park scheme attempts to justify having “brokered a deal” to move The Pride off campus.*
- *His statements conflict with official records.*

Exclusive – a Vernissage Magazine Investigation – Part 5

(Editor’s note: This article was prepared prior to the March 25, 2024, announcement that WVU has scrapped its plan to move the Pride of West Virginia marching band practice facility to privately-owned Mylan Park. After several articles in this investigation were published – and as a result of significant donor and alumni outcry – the university administration found space on the WVU campus to build the promised, state-of-the-art Pride Practice Facility. However, Vernissage Magazine believes that the information obtained in the development of this and upcoming articles in this series is in the public interest, as it sheds light on the activities of those involved in the Mylan Park scheme.)

It is the evening of October 20, 2023.

The annual Homecoming gathering of the West Virginia University Alumni Band is over.

The anger many alumni feel is not.

Band alum and Monongalia County Commission President Tom Bloom had chosen the venue to announce what he’d billed in advance as “exciting news.” He told the hundreds of alumni present that the promised Pride of West Virginia Marching Band Practice Facility that for years they’ve worked hard to fund will finally be built. But not on-campus. It will instead be built at a privately-owned recreation complex called Mylan Park, five miles from the WVU campus.

Alumni Band members played a significant role in raising the money for the Pride Practice Facility, which is entirely funded by private



The Pride Practice Facility as promised to donors and students

donations. Many were unhappy with Bloom's announcement.

Immediately afterward, Sandy Sibray posted a comment on the Alumni Band social media site. "I made one of the earliest comments on the Alumni Band social site," Sibray told *Vernissage*. "I wasn't disrespectful. I simply said that I thought it was a poorly thought-out plan and we were not going to get the state-of-the-art level of facility we were promised."

Within minutes, dozens of other alumni began posting comments on the Alumni Band social media page.

"I donated with a specific project in mind, and this is not it," wrote Sara Boppe. "I feel like I've been taken for a ride."

"Talk about bait and switch," Joe Lint wrote. "I made a donation so that the band would have a location on campus. Moving the band off of WVU's main campus is wrong."

Many alumni began raising concerns over the impact that a distant, off-campus practice location might have on band members.

"This sounds," said Nathan Burdette, "like a terrible idea. What about members who don't have their own transportation and have class conflicts or late-ending classes?"

Band alum Justin Hicks agreed: "Mylan Park is an awful location. And why would this news be coming out at homecoming? Poor timing. Poor location."



Pride funds will build a new artificial turf field at Mylan Park

Sometime later, Sibray says, Bloom messaged her: "He said, 'We need to talk.' When I called him, he was accusatory. He said to me: 'You caused a shitstorm.' But the fact is, I feel like my donations were encouraged under false pretenses. My trust has been violated."

Midnight Confession

Sometime before midnight on the night of October 20th, Bloom posted on the Alumni Band social media site, offering his explanations for facilitating the move of the Pride Practice Facility to Mylan Park. His message is copied here in its entirety, lightly edited for clarity:

"To try and answer some questions.

- 1) in reviewing the information. The Band would have to share the field [*Hawley Field site*] with several other sports programs.
- 2) parking was a serious problem.

- 3) the idea of collecting \$8 million by next year, was not a reality.
- 4) it would have taken years to build when the urgency of the field was needed now and there was concerns about the overall cost and when this all would take place.

In the last 4 weeks, I brokered a deal with WVU and Mylan Park for the following.

- 1) we would be guaranteed a new astroturf field (identical to the stadium) and we would be able to use it by next August.
- 2) we will have lights, (baseball field was not guaranteed to have lights).
- 3) I was approached by WVU band office about the possibility of Mylan Park.
- 4) my question concerning transportation was not a problem and they wanted it away from the Coliseum.
- 5) just because there was a field, did not mean we could use the field.
- 6) in discussions with the AD, it was a WVU field which means we did not have control of use of the field.

So, WVU Alumni Band officers were not involved until the last week. My concern was: how do we get a field as soon as possible with lights, at a reasonable cost that will benefit the band members and future members. The pavilion would have cost \$1.8 million alone. The field would have been over \$2.5 million. We got all this for \$1.7 million and ready for next year. I hope this clears up some confusion.”

Many alumni, however, thought Bloom’s post created more confusion.

“The 'answers',” commented alumna Carrie Cronin, “just give me 45 more questions.”

Veracity of Statements Called into Question

Information in public records obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* conflicts with most of Bloom’s assertions.

Bloom alleges that the band would not have priority access to an on-campus facility: “...just because there was a field, did not mean we could use the field,” and “...it was a WVU field which means we did not have control of use of the field.” Both statements are disputed by university press announcements, numerous donor solicitations, and by WVU internal documents describing the facility as originally planned and funded.



Tom Bloom

WVU’s very first announcement of intent to build the Pride Practice Facility, dated Nov. 11, 2019, did note that the practice field was intended to be shared. But according to the statement, the Pride of West Virginia would have priority usage: “When the band is not practicing,” the announcement states, “the facility will be open to WVU Athletics and the College of Physical Activity and Sport Sciences.”

WVU donor appeals and WVU websites stated explicitly that the Pride Practice Facility would be “a dedicated rehearsal space on the Evansdale Campus.”

The Pride’s director, Cheldon Williams, appeared with College of Creative Arts Dean Keith Jackson in a lengthy interview posted on YouTube by the WVU Alumni Association, soliciting donations to the facility. In the video Williams says: “This new field will give these students a real sense of pride and give them sense of ownership in a place where they belong, and they belong specifically; and it's only dedicated to them.”



Williams and Jackson interviewed on YouTube

Williams statements in the video contradict Bloom’s claim that that the band would not control use of the field: “We worked with Athletics, and they've given us that space,” Williams said, “we have a wonderful standing relationship with our Athletics Department.”

University documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* also confirm The Pride’s priority use of the field. WVU Procurement Services description of the planned Pride Practice Facility states: “The playing field will be multi-purpose and WVU Athletics will share use of the field when the marching band is not using it.”

Another of Bloom’s statements, “...we will have lights, (baseball field was not guaranteed to have lights),” is untrue.

In a WVU Facilities Management document, entitled, “RFP202190000265, *Design services for a Practice Facility for the WVU Marching Band, known as the Pride of West Virginia*”, Project Manager Scott Owens and Procurement Officer Harry Youdell wrote, “WVU has secured enough funds to construct Phase 1 of the project, which includes the practice field, with lights.” In fact, the planned field location already has stadium lights; the procurement document notes that companies bidding on field construction, “should investigate the feasibility of reusing the current lights from the former Hawley Field baseball facility.”



Stadium lighting at the promised Hawley Field site.

A solicitation for contributions to the Hawley Field site, posted on the WVU Alumni Band social media page by the WVU College of Creative Arts communications office, encourages alumni to donate during a WVU Foundation fundraising drive. The solicitation’s description of Phase 1 of the project is specific: “The first phase includes... lights.”



WVU ALUMNI BAND - Social Page

Bernadette Marie · February 12, 2021 · 🌐



Hi everyone! I'm back to talk about Phase 1 (of three phases) of the Pride Practice Facility project. The first phase includes demolition of Hawley Field, drainage installation, repositioning of the lights, placement of the band tower and laying of the turf!

The first phase will cost \$1,161,686. With the \$250,000 match gift opportunity on Day of Giving, you can see why we're so excited to use it to its full potential. Raising \$500,000 in one day will put us so much closer to getting the first phase underway.

This WVU solicitation tells donors that Phase 1 of the Hawley Field project will include field lighting.

Paradoxically, as more information about the Mylan Park scheme was revealed, Bloom eventually admitted that the field being built at Mylan Park will not have lights. "Lights," Bloom confessed, "are in Phase 2. However, the field next to the new field will have lights, and will be used by the band if needed." 'Phase 2' would require the band to raise additional funds.

"'Lighting won't be there?' 'They can just use the other field next door for half the semester?'" commented one donor. "It's a ridiculous 'solution' to just say 'use another field when it gets dark.' That's not an answer, that's a band-aid that had maybe two seconds of thought put into it."

In his October 20 post, Bloom claimed building the promised on-campus field would cost more than the \$1.25 million donors have contributed: "*The field would have been over \$2.5 million.*" But the College of Communications solicitation referenced above shows a Phase 1 budget of \$1,161,686.

WVU internal documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* also contradict Bloom's assertion. Records show installation of the proposed on-campus field was estimated to cost less than half the amount Bloom claims: a total of \$1.15 million, *including* lighting.

That \$1.15 million estimate in WVU records is in line with current estimates obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* from sports planners and artificial turf companies. The *Sports Venue Calculator* estimates installation of a new artificial turf football field costs an average of \$950,000, depending on the quality of the turf, local conditions, infill material and regional price differences.

WVU internal documents state that, "WVU intends to utilize *FieldTurf* brand synthetic turf to match WVU's other existing fields." *FieldTurf Company* is a chief provider of artificial turf football fields for major university and NFL stadiums. According to *FieldTurf*, the estimated average cost today of a new artificial turf football field is \$770,000.

WVU internal documents show the total cost for all phases of the promised, on-campus Pride Practice Facility is just over \$ 5.6 million; that's nearly \$2.5 million less than the \$8 million figure

Bloom claimed in his post to alumni and donors. Bloom has failed to provide substantiation or the source of his claim that the facility would cost \$8 million.

WVU Project and Procurement managers Owens and Youdell stated that WVU already had enough money in hand to fully fund the promised on-campus field when their university procurement document was issued in March of 2021.

On March 5 of 2021, Dean Keith Jackson himself posted this notice to Alumni Band members following the WVU Foundation 'Day of Giving' fundraising drive:

"Thank you so much for showing up on Day of Giving and doing your part to make the Pride Practice Field a reality for our marching band! We have been overwhelmed by the outpouring of love you showed the band this week... What I can tell you with certainty is thanks to your support on Wednesday, we met the goal that was established by University leadership to hold a groundbreaking this fall. And that, my friends, is reason to celebrate."

That ceremonial groundbreaking was held in October, 2021.

Vernissage Magazine contacted Owens and Youdell to ask why, after that groundbreaking, construction of the Pride Practice Facility never began. Both men refused to respond to the question.

Bloom's statement that "*transportation was not a problem,*" baffled many alumni and current students of the Pride, who soon discovered that the university, in fact, has no plans to transport band students to Mylan Park.

A WVU Bands FAQ that replaced a university fundraising site for the Pride Practice Facility addresses the subject, 'What plans are there for transportation for band members to the new facility?' The section reads: "Recent band students and alumni are familiar with the culture of ride-sharing that exists..." WVU administrators expect students to carpool to band practice at Mylan Park.

Freshman clarinet player Riley Wessman told the campus newspaper she is concerned about being able to get to and from the new facility. "I just want to know how transportation will work... because it's been kind of hard getting rides." Carpooling, Wessman said, often fails, so she generally walks to the band's current practice site, which is on campus next to the WVU Coliseum. That won't be an option when practices move to Mylan Park. "It's more convenient to be by the Coliseum in my opinion. I feel like the money could have gone elsewhere."

Former Pride members like Nathan Burdette believe requiring students to carpool will severely limit Pride membership: "Any notion that carpooling will get everyone there is ridiculous. This is maddening. People will be shut out of the Pride if they don't have financial means."

What most concerns many is the danger to more than 300 students who will be forced to drive the winding two-lane road to Mylan Park in late autumn darkness and inclement weather.

“A Significant Number of Crashes...”

As long ago as 2012, an independent regional transportation assessment found Chaplin Hill Road – the primary route to Mylan Park – to be deficient, with an average daily traffic flow of more than 25,000 vehicles per day, far more than its capacity. The study concluded that the route to Mylan Park, even at that time, would be able to accommodate “very few additional vehicles” and that the route was “approaching gridlock.” The study listed Chaplin Hill as a “corridor with a significant number of crashes.” The road has not been upgraded since the study.

One year after that study, in late summer 2013, a motorcyclist was killed leaving Mylan Park on a rain-slickened Chaplin Hill Road. The driver lost control of his bike and swerved into oncoming traffic, crashing onto a Dodge Neon. The driver of the Neon was injured. According to reports, several other accidents occurred that day.

In the winter of 2020, snow and ice – not uncommon during late-season band rehearsals – caused an 18-vehicle pileup on Chaplin Hill Road. County sheriffs and EMS responded, and traffic to Mylan Park was shut down for more than two hours.



Vehicle pileup on the road to Mylan Park

Even after he “brokered a deal” to force more than 300 students to carpool to Mylan Park, Tom Bloom himself – in a statement stunningly in conflict with his assertion that *‘transportation was not a problem’* – admitted the dangers of the route to the new rehearsal field. Two months after announcing the Mylan Park scheme, Bloom guested on a radio show to talk about a federal transportation grant. The host mentioned the critical need to improve Chaplin Hill Road: “With the facilities we have out there at Mylan Park... the big drawback has been, well, that road’s not good.”

Bloom acknowledged the road wasn’t good. Then he admitted that the dangerously inadequate route to Mylan Park had, in fact, cost the county an opportunity to host an Olympic qualifying event at the park: “That was our number one problem”, Bloom said, “when we were so close to getting the Olympic trials... because of the problems down there on Chaplin Hill Road.”

Contacted by *Vernissage Magazine*, Bloom and WVU officials refused to comment about the threat to the safety – or the liability to the university – of forcing hundreds of students to carpool four evenings a week over the admittedly dangerous and deficient road to Mylan Park.



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Screenshots of County Commission President Tom Bloom's explanation for having "brokered a deal" with Mylan Park.

Bloom's allegation that parking for band members at the Hawley Field site is inadequate – "*parking was a serious problem*" – is also questionable. The intended site of the promised practice facility is adjacent to WVU Coliseum and the university soccer stadium. Parking is available for thousands of vehicles, along with parking for dozens more across the street at the university's Creative Arts Center. In fact, the band currently practices on a portion of the Coliseum parking lot; moving to the originally planned site a few hundred yards away would free up roughly 120 new parking spots. That's more than enough to accommodate band members driving to practice at the originally planned on-campus facility, especially since many students would be able to walk to practice from campus housing, or from the campus rapid transit station located across the street from the Hawley Field site.

Alumni Band officers themselves directly dispute Bloom's claim that "*WVU Alumni Band officers were not involved until the last week.*" As controversy over the Mylan Park site continued to rage, Alumni Band officers released an official statement, saying, "The WVU Alumni Band was as surprised as everyone else when it was announced the Practice facility was to be moved to Mylan Park."

Emails obtained under the Freedom of Information Act show that Bloom – contrary to his assertion – never involved Alumni Band members in the Mylan Park decision.

In an October 25, 2023 email to Keith Jackson, WVU Director of Bands Scott Tobias, and WVU Foundation staff member Jennifer Jordan, Bloom expresses frustration over alumni and donors outspokenly opposing the Mylan Park scheme: "I made it very clear when we had our initial meeting that the Alumni Band needed to be informed."

The date of that 'initial meeting' between Bloom, Jackson, and Jordan directly contradicts another of Bloom's assertions; that, "In the last 4 weeks, I brokered a deal with WVU and Mylan Park..." Email records obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* reveal that initial meeting took place on August 22, 2023, three months before Bloom's announcement to band alumni at Homecoming.

Vernissage Magazine reached out to Tom Bloom, asking for documentation of the assertions he made in his post giving his reasons why the Pride Practice Facility cannot be built on the site that was promised to band members and to donors in university and WVU Foundation

solicitations. *Vernissage* also offered Bloom the opportunity to comment on the contents of this article. Bloom failed to respond.

Accusations of Malfeasance

Immediately after Bloom's late-night post on the Alumni Band site, comments began rolling in.

"I respect you, Tom," wrote Dylan Johnson, "but no matter how this is being spun it is wrong."

Ann Mayle agreed: "I'm sorry, Tom... How can anyone justify this obvious bait and switch?"

Some alumni questioned Bloom's statement, "*My concern was: how do we get a field as soon as possible...*"

"Is there a reason," asked Mike Cerpa, "this is suddenly so urgent?"

There were 162 comments on Tom Bloom's late-night post. Bloom did not respond to a single comment.

More and more alumni took to posting on the Alumni Band social pages. Comments on the site grew angrier, and some became accusatory.

"This is an absolutely short-sighted and ignorant idea that reeks of typical Mon County politics," wrote one Alumni Band member.

Wrote another. "It has Tom Bloom written all over it. Dude has spent the last decade working on Mylan Park. Of course, he would use his spot in the Alumni Band to steal funds for his pet project."

Within a few hours, site moderator Jerry Clark shut off comments, and deleted many of the posts. "I think all but two of the posts about the field have been removed," Clark wrote. "Name calling and accusing people of malfeasance, etc. will not be tolerated."

Members who wanted to continue discussion about the practice facility were directed to a private chatroom.

It would be another four days before anyone else involved in the Mylan Park scheme attempted a statement. Once again, the statement would raise far more questions than it answered.

In the next *Vernissage Magazine* article:

- ***The Dean of the College of Creative Arts gives his reasons why the marching band practice facility that donors funded can't be built on-campus.***
- ***Documents reveal every one of the Dean's reasons is dubious.***



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