



Pride Practice Facility: The Dean of Deceit – Answers Don't Add Up

- *The Dean of the College of Creative Arts tells donors why the marching band practice facility they supported can't be built on-campus.*
- *Every reason he gives conflicts with official records.*

Exclusive: A Vernissage Magazine Investigation – Part 6

In October of 2021, West Virginia University broke ground for the new Pride of West Virginia Practice Facility, a state-of-the-art marching band practice complex on the Evansdale campus. It was the culmination of a long-time dream – and years of fundraising – by alumni and friends of the WVU Pride of West Virginia Marching Band.

At the podium, College of Creative Arts Dean Keith Jackson raved about the importance of the Pride marching band to the University, and to the state:

"I know the most visible part of our college is the Pride," Dean Jackson said. "I know for the state of West Virginia, the best ambassadors for our state are the Pride."



The Pride plays at the 2021 groundbreaking

The first phase of the Pride Practice Facility – the artificial turf replica of WVU's Mountaineer field with lights and director's tower – was supposed to be complete on the site of Hawley Field, WVU's former baseball stadium, by fall of 2022. But construction never began.

Then, at Homecoming on October 20, 2023, band members and alumni were told that it never would.

Instead, the Pride's artificial turf field would be built at Mylan Park, a privately-owned facility that serves as a community recreation complex. Mylan Park is nearly five miles away from campus.

Student members of the band were concerned about the off-campus location, and the fact that they were being told to car-pool to their distant new practice site. Documents

obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* show that band members who complained in the wake of that announcement were humiliated by College of Creative Arts staff; and, shortly afterward, student band members were forbidden from speaking out in opposition to the Mylan Park move, despite the fact that such restrictions violate West Virginia state law.

Many alumni and donors, who raised approximately \$1.25 million to privately fund the facility, felt betrayed by the Mylan Park move. This was not the state-of-the-art facility to which they had donated; not the facility they'd seen in numerous architectural renderings in the donor solicitations urging them to contribute.

"Donors were told one thing to get them to give money and then are being delivered something else," said alum Shaun Moyers. "Classic bait-and-switch."

Documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act reveal that, since mid-2023, Jackson, WVU administrators, a WVU Foundation staff member, and members of the Monongalia County Commission, conspired to redirect the funds that contributors gave to build an on-campus practice facility for WVU's marching band, and instead use that money to build an artificial turf football field that Mylan Park has long wanted, but has been unable to finance. Two of the university administrators involved in initiating the scheme, Athletic Director Wren Baker and University Director of Local Affairs Ron Justice, hold seats on the Board of Directors of the Mylan Park Foundation. Justice is the Foundation's president.



Wren Baker

Ron Justice

Meanwhile, Jackson and WVU's College of Creative Arts development director Jennifer Jordan - the WVU Foundation staff member involved in the scheme - continued actively soliciting donations for the promised on-campus band practice facility, fully aware that those contributions would be used to benefit Mylan Park, and not the purpose for which the donations were being solicited.

"I think it is an egregious slap in the face towards the people who donated the money," said donor Sandy Sibray, "that the University and Foundation continued to promote and accept the concept as we all understood it to be at the old baseball facility. I think this is approaching fraud."

Questions, But No Answers

Alumni and donors had questions and concerns. Lots of them.

Why is the planned practice facility for the West Virginia University marching band being moved so far away from its planned location? How would students get there? How will the need to leave campus early to get to Mylan Park affect students who must take late-afternoon classes required by their degree programs?

Student marching band members had many of the same concerns. But *Vernissage* interviews, as well as documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine*, reveal that after a few Pride members publicly expressed their apprehensions to the campus newspaper band members were ordered not to speak out.

Suddenly, and for some reason, members of the Pride of West Virginia went from being the most visible, best ambassadors for the state, to inconvenient persona non grata. And WVU College of Creative Arts Dean Keith Jackson, one of the key figures behind the Mylan Park scheme, has consistently dodged questioners seeking complete, documentable answers as to why.

In the first days after the announcement that the planned facility was being relocated, Monongalia County Commission President Tom Bloom – a 70s-era band alumnus who claimed that he “brokered a deal with WVU and Mylan Park” for the move, and who worked with Jackson and others to facilitate the scheme – engaged upset donors in an online chatroom:

“Tom, how about providing some information,” asked donor Katrina Roop, “since you stated you helped broker this deal? We want answers to valid questions.”

“You have every right to ask questions,” Bloom replied, “and those answers will come from the Music Department.”

Alumni donor Aaron Dean then states: “The Music Department either can’t or won’t give satisfactory answers. This change in venue has greatly eroded many alumni’s’ trust in the Band Office; I’m not seeing an effort being made to address our concerns and rebuild that trust.”

Others chimed in with unanswered questions and concerns. Bloom grew frustrated: “I strongly urge you to contact the Music Department,” he wrote.

“We have,” replied donor Mark Dean. “And they don’t have answers, either.”

From the beginning, the few explanations given by Jackson, Bloom, and others involved in the scheme to use the band’s donor funds to benefit Mylan Park have been riddled with statements that are inconsistent with information in official documents, and even their own prior statements.

Answers That Don’t Fit Facts

The evening of October 21, 2023, County Commission President Tom Bloom, buffeted by alumni donor questions following his own attempt to explain the practice facility move, sent an email to Jackson: “We do need to get that informational letter out.”

Three days later, on October 24, Dean Keith Jackson issued a letter via the College of Creative Arts news release site: “Dear Pride Supporter,” it began, “Last week we announced an important update for the planned location of the Pride Practice Field...”



Keith Jackson

In a nine-paragraph letter of 539 words, Jackson devotes one-third of one paragraph, exactly 31 words, to providing his reasons why the Pride Practice Facility cannot be built at Hawley Field, the on-campus site that was promised to donors in numerous solicitations:

“Priority usage could not be guaranteed,” he wrote. “There were concerns with drainage from the site into neighboring areas. And there were doubts we would have enough space to build the storage facility.”

“Concerns with Drainage”

Despite repeated requests from alumni and media, no documentation of drainage issues at the promised site has ever been presented. Jackson has refused to respond to inquiries seeking verifiable records of any concerns regarding drainage at Hawley Field.

Many alumni and donors don’t buy it.

“How can a Division 1 baseball field be used for 41 years and then suddenly develop ‘drainage issues’ when the band wants to use the site?” asks alumnus Mark McCollum. “Were there drainage issues during all those baseball seasons?”

McCollum has a point. ‘Rule 1, Section 4 – Drainage’ of the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) baseball regulations require that baseball fields be constructed and graded in such a way as to facilitate proper drainage.

Contrary to Jackson’s statement, numerous documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* indicate that there are no serious drainage issues at the Hawley Field site.

In January 2021, College of Creative Arts Communications Specialist Bernadette Marie posted a donor solicitation on the WVU Alumni Band Social Page in preparation for the WVU Foundation’s Day of Giving fundraising drive. In the solicitation, Marie describes the first phase of the planned Pride Practice Facility construction on the Hawley Field site: “The first phase includes demolition of Hawley Field, drainage installation, repositioning of the lights, placement of the band tower, and laying the turf.”



WWU 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.

College of Creative Arts WWU Foundation "Day of Giving" donor solicitation, noting drainage installation

In March of 2021, WVU's Procurement, Contracting & Payment Services Department issued a bid for the construction of the Pride Practice Facility on the promised Hawley Field site. The document does not mention drainage concerns. In fact, the construction procurement document builds standard drainage requirements into the construction package: "The architect engineer should plan to evaluate all utilities to determine requirements and design all supporting utilities (including stormwater...)"

FIND THE DRAINAGE ISSUE

Both photographs at right were taken on the afternoon of March 11, 2024.

Top: Hawley Field. This is the site originally promised to the Pride and to donors in solicitations.

Bottom: This is the location where Mylan Park intends to use the Pride's \$1.25 million in donated funds to build a football field that the band can use for practice.



"Enough Space"

Another of Jackson's assertions was that the Hawley Field site is too small to build the entire planned practice facility: "...there were doubts we would have enough space to build the storage facility."

However, WVU's own request for construction proposals states otherwise. According to the document: "A conceptual layout was completed by (an architectural firm) in order to determine the project feasibility..."

The document notes that there is room enough on the Hawley Field site for, "...an artificial turf field, lights, conductor tower, storage facility, covered pavilion, a donor honor wall and driveway with a small parking area." That site description includes everything illustrated in architectural



One of the conceptual layouts mentioned in the RFP

renderings that WVU and the WVU Foundation used to solicit donor contributions.

"If (lack of space) was the 'real reason,'" asked one donor, "why wasn't it presented to us initially? Was 'lack of space' something someone just thought up, and thought that it might sell? It is sad. The trust is broken."

"Priority Usage"

Jackson's third claimed reason for the move is that at the Hawley Field site, "priority usage could not be guaranteed."

But WVU records categorically state otherwise. The university's own request for bids package states that the marching band would be priority user of the promised Hawley Field location: "The playing field will be multi-purpose and WVU Athletics will share use of the field when the marching band is not using it."

WVU's very first announcement of intent to build the Pride Practice Facility, dated Nov. 11, 2019, states: "When the band is not practicing, the facility will be open to WVU Athletics and the College of Physical Activity and Sport Sciences."

Donor solicitations on the WVU College of Creative Arts website also stated explicitly that the Pride Practice Facility would be "a dedicated rehearsal space on the Evansdale Campus," and, with the help of 'generous alumni', "we'll give our band a home they can call their own."

A 2021 WVU Foundation 'Day of Giving' fundraising solicitation refers to the Hawley Field site as "a permanent and dedicated facility" for the band. That solicitation quotes Jackson: "The Mountaineer Marching Band is an essential element of WVU's character and pride and we are eager to provide them with the space they deserve." The solicitation is illustrated with architectural renderings of the planned facility on the Hawley Field site, with the WVU Coliseum in the background.

College of Creative Arts administrators are also on record saying that the marching band would have priority at the promised on-campus site. In 2021, Jackson and WVU Director of Athletic Bands Cheldon Williams were interviewed by WVU Alumni Association Director of Marketing and Communications Andrew Sealy and Director of Alumni Engagement Meredith Balas. The interview was posted on the WVU Alumni Association's YouTube site to solicit funds for the envisioned Pride Practice Facility.



Williams and Jackson interviewed on YouTube

In the interview, Williams – who is director of the Pride – states that the fact the band will have priority at the Hawley Field location will give them “a sense of belonging.”

“This new field will give these students a sense of pride and give them a sense of ownership in a place where they belong,” Williams said, “and it’s only dedicated to them.”

Dean Keith Jackson is side-by-side on-screen with Williams, nodding agreement.

Additionally, documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act reveal that the Pride of West Virginia will have to share the field built at Mylan Park. That field will be rented out for community athletic events and tournaments. On October 22, 2023, County Commissioner Tom Bloom sent an email to Keith Jackson, discussing alumni and donor objections to the Mylan Park plan. In the email, Bloom states that donors were complaining that Mylan Park, “is going to make money because the community might be able to use (the field). They truly believed that this field would be used (by the marching band), and then just sit there.”

WVU and Mylan Park officials refused to answer *Vernissage Magazine* questions about whether the Pride of West Virginia will receive any portion of the fees Mylan Park receives for renting out the athletic field built with the band’s private donations.

Of the three reasons that College of Creative Arts Dean Keith Jackson gave for moving the Pride Practice Facility to Mylan Park, all are directly contradicted by West Virginia University documents, statements made by Jackson himself, as well as by Williams, and by numerous University and WVU Foundation solicitations to prospective donors.

In summary, every single one of the reasons College of Creative Arts Dean Keith Jackson presented to donors to justify the diversion of the \$1.25 million they contributed to an on-campus practice facility is directly contradicted by official WVU documents, as well as other verifiable university sources:

- **Drainage Issues:** *WVU internal documents show no drainage issues at Hawley Field, and University construction plans include adequate drainage in the first phase of facility construction. Jackson and the University have refused to produce documentation of alleged drainage concerns.*

- **Lack of Space:** *WVU internal documents and Pride Practice Facility feasibility and architectural plans demonstrate adequate space at Hawley Field for all phases of the promised Pride Practice Facility.*
- **Priority Usage:** *WVU internal documents, University media announcements, University and WVU Foundation donor solicitations and marketing material, and public statements made by marching band administrators all clearly demonstrate the Pride would be the priority user of the promised Hawley Field facility.*

In November 2023, *Vernissage Magazine* asked WVU Foundation President and CEO Cindi Roth why the WVU Foundation would consider using donations that were explicitly solicited for an on-campus Pride Practice Facility to build a field that would benefit Mylan Park. In response, Roth simply parroted Jackson's statements: "As the University continued to plan for a new practice facility, several issues evolved with the on-campus site. Priority usage, drainage issues and space concerns led the leadership team to look for a new space..."

When confronted by *Vernissage Magazine* with evidence that Jackson's claims are dubious, the WVU Foundation's Roth refused to answer the question of whether the WVU Foundation ever performed any independent due diligence before agreeing to the use of \$1.25 million in donor funds to build an artificial turf football field at Mylan Park.

"I swear the more that comes out about this the less impressed I am," wrote alumni Shaun Moyers in an alumni chatroom after reading Jackson's letter. "It seems like the administration is just throwing shit against the wall and hoping that it will stick. Still seems shady as hell."

'Sooner' is Three Years Later

In his "Letter from the Dean" Keith Jackson states that because of the alleged issues at Hawley Field, "The University approached Mylan Park with the option of building the practice field and facility there. After several conversations, the decision was made to enter into the partnership agreement," with Mylan Park.

On October 24, 2023, an online FAQ was posted on the College of Creative Arts Band website, replacing the page that was soliciting funds for the on-campus Pride Practice Facility. The FAQ states that a groundbreaking for the Mylan Park field will be held at in early 2024, noting: "...this project will be completed by August 2024, allowing the band to practice on the turf-field much sooner than anticipated."

Keith Jackson made the same statement in his letter, writing that the artificial turf field would be ready for the band, "...much sooner than anticipated."

But documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* through the Freedom of Information Act reveal that WVU had already collected enough money to build the promised on-campus practice field three years ago. In March of 2021, WVU's construction services reported: "WVU has secured enough funds to construct Phase 1 of the project, which includes the practice field, with lights and band tower."

That same month, Jackson posted a message to Alumni Band members, thanking them for their support of the Pride Practice Facility during the WVU Foundation's 'Day of Giving' fundraising drive:

"We have been overwhelmed with the outpouring of love you showed for the band this week..." Jackson wrote. "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 groundbreaking for the promised Pride Practice Facility was held on the Evansdale Campus on October 3, 2021. College of Creative Arts Dean Keith Jackson spoke at that event. So did Cindi Roth, President and CEO of the WVU Foundation, and WVU President Gordon Gee. According to media reports, both Gee and Roth told the assembled crowd about how terrific they thought the marching band is, and why it truly deserves to be called "The Pride of West Virginia".



Cindi Roth at the 2021 groundbreaking

Roth told those in attendance that The Pride of West Virginia should have its new field by the fall of 2022. "Mountaineers come through," Roth said to the crowd. "But there's nothing like bandsmen and bandswomen. They are so passionate."

Now many of those bandsmen and bandswomen – present and past – want to know why Cindi Roth's WVU Foundation, College of Creative Arts Dean Keith Jackson, members of WVU's administration, and the Monongalia County Commission, are working together to divert the band's donated funds to benefit Mylan Park, without regard for how the move might affect the Pride of West Virginia.

"The passion here is real," said alumna Mary Ann Burbank. "The bait and switch is absurd."

The documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* show that as recently as spring of 2023, University Administrators were still planning to hold a second groundbreaking on the Hawley Field site. On March 24, 2023, WVU Vice Provost Paul Kreider wrote an email to WVU Foundation Executive Vice President and Chief Development Officer B.J. Davisson. Under the heading, 'RE: Pride Practice Facility' Kreider wrote: "We have a ceremonial groundbreaking that is being scheduled. Keith (Jackson) is working with Facilities folks to schedule."

That same month, the WVU Foundation featured the promised on-campus Pride Practice Facility in its 2023 spring 'Day of Giving' fundraising campaign. So many donors contributed to the Pride Practice Facility on that one day that they unlocked a special challenge, providing an additional \$40,000 for the promised on-campus complex for the benefit of, in the Foundation's words: "our deserving band students."

Kreider and several other WVU officials refused to answer a series of *Vernissage Magazine* questions about why that planned 2023 groundbreaking was never held, or why the Pride Practice Facility, in just four months' time, became a football field at Mylan Park built with the Pride's donated funds.

Officials of both WVU and the WVU Foundation refused to answer *Vernissage* questions about why, after the October 2021 groundbreaking, construction on the promised Hawley Field site never started, even though the project was – according to internal university documents – “fully funded.”

WVU employees who were assigned to manage construction of the Pride Practice Facility also refused, through a university spokesperson, to respond to *Vernissage Magazine* questions about why the Pride Practice Facility was never built, even though their own department records clearly indicate that the university had collected enough money to fund the project.

“The absolute silence from the people in administrative positions is deafening,” donor Nick Crites wrote in the alumni chatroom, “The fact is there has been absolutely no one to step forward and answer our laundry list of questions should tell you that something is not quite above board here.”

Keith Jackson and Tom Bloom did not respond to questions from *Vernissage Magazine*. Neither individual responded when provided the opportunity to comment on the contents of this article.

In January 2024, Keith Jackson was named dean of the new College of Creative Arts and Media, which will combine the College of Creative Arts and the Reed College of Media. West Virginia University administrators have refused to answer questions about Dean Keith Jackson's involvement in the scheme to divert \$1.25 million in WVU donor contributions to benefit the privately-owned Mylan Park.

In the next *Vernissage Magazine* article:

- ***Donors have serious questions for those planning to use their contributions at Mylan Park. County Commissioner Tom Bloom responds: “Why do they have to give answers to you?”***
- ***Dean Keith Jackson calls building a field for Mylan Park, “a gesture of good will and community engagement.”***