



Pride Practice Facility: Et Tu Bloom? Betrayal by a Trusted Ally

- ***Donors want answers from the university. But the man who ‘brokered a deal’ asks: “Why do they have to give answers to you?”***
- ***Commissioner says Mylan Park is “becoming WVU’s new campus.”***

Exclusive: A Vernissage Magazine Investigation – Part 7

In the 1970s, Tom Bloom was one of the student leaders of the West Virginia University marching band. His beats on a big bass drum sent the band into motion. Band members counted them to their step-off: ‘Bloom, Bloom... Bloom-Bloom-Bloom.’

With blue eyes and a broad smile, Bloom’s charm was an inspiration to his fellow band members.

Over the years, as he advanced from school counselor to Morgantown City Councilman to President of the Monongalia County Commission, the former bass drummer was always considered a staunch supporter of WVU’s Pride of West Virginia marching band.

So, it was surprising to many band alumni that they would come to view Tom Bloom as the man who betrayed The Pride.

The Alumni Band organization has, for years, been a driving force behind the effort to build a state-of-the-art marching band practice facility on the WVU campus, one that would equal or surpass those of rival universities. Many Alumni Band members donated to the fund created to build the facility.

Yet on October 20, 2023, Tom Bloom announced at the group’s Homecoming gathering that he had “brokered a deal” to use the band’s \$1.25 million in private contributions to build an artificial turf field at Mylan Park, a privately-owner recreation center located nearly five miles away from campus. On the Alumni band social media site, Bloom had been promoting that “exciting news” would come out at the group’s homecoming event.

But far from being excited, many alumni felt victimized by what they perceived as misuse of their donations. Some called it a 'bait and switch' scheme, saying they had contributed based on explicit promises that the practice facility would be built on the Evansdale Campus site of Hawley Field, the former WVU baseball stadium, and that the facility would look like the renderings they had been shown in donor solicitations.

Band members and alumni alike worry that moving The Pride's late-afternoon, four-day-a-week practices to a site so far from campus will hurt the band, especially since the University is not providing the more than 300 band members transportation to Mylan Park. Instead, students are expected to drive on their own or carpool the winding, two-lane roads to the complex.



The road to Mylan Park is listed "deficient" in studies

Freshman clarinet player Riley Wessman told the student newspaper that she is concerned about getting to and from the new facility. "I don't know if they're going to just expect us all to get rides," she said, "I mean, some people are nice enough to give rides but not everybody's willing" Alumni and parents of band students worry about the potential hazards and liability of carpooling.

Others expressed concern that the distance and time it takes to get to Mylan Park will force some students to drop out of the band because of class commitments, and cause others to never join.

"The location of this facility is only going to build barriers to participation," said one alumni. "Students shouldn't have to travel these roads in cars to get to a class. They shouldn't have to have a car on campus all day just so they can get to their last class in the middle of nowhere."

"This is maddening," echoed Nathan Burdette, "People will be shut out of The Pride if they don't have financial means."

A major concern of many is the dangerous inadequacy of the secondary roads leading to Mylan Park, especially in late autumn darkness and inclement weather. A 2012 traffic study found the primary route to the park – Chaplin Hill Road – was "deficient" even then, burdened well beyond its capacity, with a history of "a significant number of crashes." The road has not been improved since that study.

People like Tom Bloom. He is charismatic. Some alumni, however, resent the way he has used his membership in the Alumni Band for political gain. For example, he regularly plasters large ‘Reelect Bloom’ stickers on his drum during performances.

“I take issue with the campaign signs on his bass drum,” Aaron Dean wrote in an alumni chatroom after the announcement. “Even before all this, I had a problem with that.”

“I do too,” Shaun Moyers responded. “Makes it appear that he is endorsed by the Alumni Band.”



Tom Bloom

Wrote another: “That bass drum promoting himself should never see the light of day at another Alumni Band event...”

Bloom has repeatedly insisted that he acted on his own – not as a county commissioner – when he brokered the deal between WVU and Mylan Park. He has also consistently maintained that the Monongalia County Commission was not involved in the Mylan Park scheme.

Records show that both statements are untrue:

- Emails obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show that Bloom was acting as a County Commissioner when first approached to discuss moving the Pride Practice Facility.
- Those emails show that days later, all three Monongalia County Commissioners met with Mylan Park Foundation directors and WVU administrators in what Bloom described as a “behind-closed-doors” meeting where the Mylan Park scheme was concocted.

Entangled Interests: County Commissioners, WVU and Mylan Park

Documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show that Bloom was contacted on August 9, 2023, by WVU College of Creative Arts Dean Keith Jackson. They arranged to meet, along with WVU Foundation staff member Jennifer Jordan, on August 22. The emails arranging the meeting – obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* through the Freedom of Information Act – specifically state that Bloom would attend “...as County Commissioner.”

Wondering if we can get together for lunch or a drink sometime soon. I would be including Jennifer Jordan, and would like to float an idea by you as County Commissioner.

August 9 email from Jackson to Tom Bloom “...as a County Commissioner.”

On August 28, all three Monongalia County Commissioners, WVU Vice President and Director of Athletics Wren Baker, and WVU’s Director of Local Government Relations Ron Justice gathered in an unannounced meeting of commissioners. In an email immediately after that meeting, obtained by *Vernissage Magazine*, Bloom wrote to Jackson:

“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.”

I had a meeting today with Wren Baker, Ron Justice and the County Commissioners. We discussed a number of issues and I brought up an idea about the band field being out at Mylan.
All of this was done behind closed doors.

August 28 email from Bloom to Jackson: “All of this was done behind closed doors.”

Wren Baker, County Commissioner Sean Sikora, and Ron Justice are all members of the Mylan Park Foundation Board of Directors. Justice is the board’s President.

Bloom and Jackson have publicly stated their reasons why the Pride of West Virginia Practice Facility can’t be built on the site that was promised to band members and donors.

Left to right:

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



A *Vernissage Magazine* review of WVU records indicates that the reasons given are dubious.

- **Bloom and Jackson have both stated that The Pride would not have priority usage at the originally promised on-campus site.** *But WVU internal documents clearly state that the band would be priority user of the facility.*
- **Bloom stated the on-campus site was not guaranteed to have stadium lights.** *WVU internal documents include lighting in the initial construction costs.*
- **Bloom claimed an on-campus field would cost “over \$2.5 million.”** *WVU internal documents and field construction contractors estimate the current cost at roughly \$1.15 million or less, well within The Pride’s donated funding.*
- **Jackson claimed there were drainage issues at the promised on-campus location.** *Yet WVU internal documents show no evidence of concern over drainage. In fact, construction records for the planned on-campus facility include adequate drainage in the contract proposal. Donor solicitations say the first phase of the facility includes drainage installation. The Mylan Park site, however, has serious drainage issues.*
- **Jackson has claimed the location of the promised on-campus facility didn’t have enough space.** *But WVU internal records and plans developed for the University by an independent architectural firm clearly demonstrate that the on-campus site has adequate space for all phases of the planned, state-of-the-art complex.*

Bloom and Jackson have failed to respond to requests for documentation of their assertions.

University records and public statements made by Mylan Park Foundation board members show that Mylan Park has long wanted to have a new artificial turf football field, but has been unable to find funding.

Why would County Commissioner Tom Bloom be the one chosen to “broker a deal” to move the Pride of West Virginia’s planned practice football field to Mylan Park, and use the band’s \$1.25 million in private donations to build it?

Public records show that Tom Bloom has close ties to several Mylan Park Foundation directors, including Mylan Park Board President Ron Justice, and Directors Susan Riddle and Sean Sikora.

Bloom and Sikora have served together on the Monongalia County Commission since 2016. Sikora took over from Bloom as president of the commission at the beginning of this year.

Ron Justice and Susan Riddle both spoke publicly in the fall of 2023 about Mylan Park’s need to find a way to finance a new artificial turf athletic field to keep the park competitive with other regional sports complexes.

Prior to the Mylan Park scheme becoming public, Ron Justice told a radio interviewer that the Foundation was, “...seeing another opportunity (to finance a new field), and – I can’t let the cat out of the bag too quick – but to potentially realize that additional field in the near future.”

Records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show that in the weeks prior to that statement, Justice was already engaging in email conversations with Bloom, as well as Jackson, Jordan, WVU Director of Bands Scott Tobias, and other Mylan Park board directors, about the design and installation of a new field at Mylan Park, to be paid for with The Pride’s donated funds.

Days after Bloom announced WVU’s intent to use the Pride Practice Facility Fund to build an artificial turf field at Mylan Park, Mylan board director Susan Riddle was interviewed on a radio talk show. “Through use of the Pride of West Virginia’s money,” Riddle said, “We will go from one multipurpose field to two multipurpose fields. It’s a gamechanger for us.”

In an email to Jackson entitled ‘concern of band field’, Bloom wrote about having issues with upset donors and noted: “Susan Riddle was on the radio promoting the project.”



Susan Riddle

The Mylan Park Connections

Susan Riddle, while serving on the Mylan Park board, is also President and Chief Executive Officer of the local Mountaineer Country Convention and Visitors Bureau. Public records show County Commissioner Tom Bloom is on Riddle’s Mountaineer Country Board of Directors.

Prior to becoming county commissioner, Bloom served alongside Ron Justice for a decade on the Morgantown City Council. Bloom was first elected Monongalia County Commissioner in 2012. According to records on file with the Monongalia County Clerk's Office, Bloom's campaign treasurer was Ross Justice, who, according to Democratic Party insiders and county public records, is the son of the Mylan Park Board President Ron Justice.

In a 2019 interview with the Morgantown *Dominion Post* newspaper, Bloom stated that one of his first missions as a county commissioner was to meet with WVU's athletic director to discuss why University recreational facilities weren't open to community members.

"We didn't want the community closed out," Bloom told the newspaper.

That meeting led to the University eventually moving its swimming and track facilities to Mylan Park. The \$35 million aquatic center and \$7 million track complex at Mylan Park are both – as will be the Pride of West Virginia's artificial turf practice field – available for use by the community and amateur sporting events. An FAQ page posted on the WVU band website after the Mylan Park announcement states that The Pride's donor-funded field will be available to sports teams and local marching bands: "Allowing controlled use of the field by approved groups is a gesture of good will and community engagement." Mylan Park and WVU officials have failed to respond to *Vernissage Magazine* inquiries asking whether the band – which is paying to build the field – will receive any income from rental fees paid to Mylan Park.

When WVU announced building its aquatic and track complex at Mylan Park, then-Athletic Director Shane Lyons – who public records show held a seat on the Mylan Park Foundation Board of Directors – noted: "WVU already has a strong annual financial commitment in Mylan Park facilities and this partnership will enhance that financial base as the primary tenant..."

Another WVU release about the aquatic and track complex noted: "Total funding for the Mylan Park complex...will primarily come from rental agreements with WVU." The release also quoted an unnamed Mylan Park Foundation Board member, who said of the aquatic and track complex: "It's going to be a game-changer," and would enhance the park's ability to lure customers from across the region. It is the same statement Susan Riddle made after it was announced WVU would use the band's money to build the artificial turf field that Mylan Park has long wanted.

In his public comments since announcing that he "brokered a deal" to use the WVU marching band's contributions to fund the new athletic field at Mylan Park, Bloom has consistently stated that Monongalia County was in no way involved in the scheme. Yet documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show all three commissioners attended the "behind-closed-doors" meeting where the Mylan Park scheme was initiated.

In an October 25, 2023, email obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* through the Freedom of Information Act, Bloom discussed donors who were complaining that using band funds at Mylan Park is a misuse of their contributions. He wrote to Jackson, Jordan, and Tobias: "This is the

same problem the County faced when we moved the swimming complex and track out to Mylan Park.”

This is the same problem the County faced when we moved the Swimming complex and track out to Mylan Park.

Tom Bloom's October 25 email to Keith Jackson, Jennifer Jordan, and Scott Tobias

In news article after news article about Mylan Park, County Commissioner Tom Bloom features prominently.

Bloom spoke at the ceremony announcing construction of WVU's aquatic center at Mylan Park. He thanked those involved, including his colleagues at the County Commission, the Convention and Visitors Bureau for which he is a board member, the Mylan Park Foundation, and WVU; all of which also feature prominently in the marching band practice field scheme.

Bloom participated in the 2022 groundbreaking for a six-million-dollar Mylan Park bike racing facility built with government funds. At the groundbreaking, in which Justice, Riddle, and WVU President E. Gordon Gee also participated, Bloom said the collaboration, "...goes to the entire concept that we are promoting, that Mylan Park will be for everyone."

When Monongalia County Commissioners endorsed pursuit of a grant for a \$150 million highway interchange, Commissioner Bloom noted that the final product of the highway project will be a new four-lane corridor to Mylan Park.



Tom Bloom, Susan Riddle, Ron Justice, WVU President E. Gordon Gee, and WVU Asst. VP of Economic, Community and Asset Development Danny Twilley break ground for Mylan Park's six-million-dollar taxpayer-funded bike racing course.

Bloom even guested on a local TV news program, talking about Mylan Park's programs to teach second graders how to swim.

Bloom's long-time connections to Mylan Park did not go unnoticed to donors unhappy about contributions that were solicited for an on-campus practice site being diverted to build an athletic field at Mylan Park: "It has Tom Bloom written all over it," wrote one donor in a now-

deleted post on an Alumni Band social media site. “Dude has spent the last decade working on Mylan Park.”

“Why Do They Have to Give Answers to You?”

The week after announcing the Pride Practice Facility Fund would be used to build a field at Mylan Park, Bloom entered an Alumni Band chatroom, confronting alumni complaining about what they believe is misuse of donor funds.

Many alumni in the chat, like Aaron Dean, protested that donors were not getting answers from the University or the WVU Foundation about what, exactly, would be included in the facility at Mylan Park, or what plans were in place to ensure band students would be able to get to their new, remote practice site safely and affordably.

The chatroom conversation which follows has been edited for clarity.

“We – the alumni – were solicited for funds to build the facility,” wrote Dean. “We have a right to know exactly what our money is being used for and the details associated with that use. Whether the powers-that-be like it or not, we are stakeholders in this project.”

“Why do they have to give answers to you?” Bloom asked.

“Your initial post said you were the one to broker the deal,” alumni Mark Dean replied. “As an elected official, and as this is a development project in Monongalia County, should we not be able to ask these questions to you and/or the Monongalia County Commission as well?”

“County Commission was never involved,” Bloom claimed.

“We want answers to valid questions. We want what’s best for the WVU band,” wrote Katrina Roop.

“You gave money to the Foundation for a new band field, and that is what they’re planning to do.” said Bloom.

“We’ve heard several times, including from the Dean (Keith Jackson), ‘the money was being donated for a field and that’s what it’s being used for,’” wrote Chris Carpenter, who, like many donors, contended contributions to the WVU Foundation’s Pride Practice Facility Fund should legally be restricted to the on-campus site for which they were solicited. “That’s astoundingly ignorant for any group soliciting donations. Reading the plain text of the State Code,” Carpenter wrote, “violating that standard means one is guilty of fraud.”

“This is my last response,” replied Bloom. “Have you thought that the reason they did not want to answer every question is because of the incorrect and volatile false

comments that have been spread? Again, please look at your donation. It went to the WVU Foundation for a band field.”

“No,” Carpenter replied, “that did not cross my mind. It would seem that’d be a reason to answer them and clear things up, not let misunderstandings persist and jeopardize your relationship with your donor base. Don’t pretend that donors are the ones in the wrong here. It’s Insulting.”

“Students shouldn’t have to settle This is just bad business and everyone knows it,” wrote Dylan Johnson. Added Carpenter: “Ultimately I’m focused on the band.”

Replied Bloom: “Just because the ‘details’ are not made public does not mean they are not resolved.”

“We’ve got no idea what’s going on or who to believe,” wrote Dean.

“Everyone has been quiet since this announcement went out,” Taylor Kinney said. “No information has been given, other than this deal was done behind closed doors.”

“The bottom line,” added another donor, “is that Mylan Park is benefitting from the alumni donations.”

“It’s becoming very clear,” Bloom replied, “that Mylan Park facilities are becoming WVU’s new campus. I hope you have a great day.” [Leaves Chat]

“Well,” said Dean, “Mr. Bloom basically said we didn't deserve these answers, when he was pressed on it. So...

“He basically was so excited about this deal until the donors got upset,” wrote Sean Moyers. “Then he decided to back away and is declining to answer legitimate questions. Typical politician.”

“More band crap...”

After engaging disgruntled donors in the chatroom, Bloom emailed portions of the conversation to WVU Dean Keith Jackson and Mylan Park President Ron Justice, writing: “Just a sampling of the individuals who continue to cause problems.”

The subject heading of Bloom’s email was “more band crap.”

From: Tom Bloom
Sent: Sunday, November 5, 2023 1:31 PM
To: Keith Jackson; Ronald Justice
Subject: more band crap

Just a sampling of the individuals who continue to cause problems...

Tom Bloom's email to Jackson and Justice, "more band crap" from upset donors

Tom Bloom did not respond to questions from *Vernissage Magazine*. He failed to respond to *Vernissage Magazine's* offer to comment on the content of this article.

Wren Baker and Ron Justice, through a University Spokesperson, declined to answer questions from *Vernissage* or provide comments for this article.

Susan Riddle also failed to respond to inquiries from *Vernissage Magazine*.

In the next *Vernissage Magazine* article:

- ***The County Commissioner behind the Mylan Park scheme breaks his silence... and claims there was never a deal with Mylan Park.***
- ***People, he says, don't understand the meaning of the word 'brokered', and "did not want the truth because it did not make a good story."***



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