

Pride Practice Facility: Denials and Deceit

- **The County Commissioner who six months ago bragged that he “brokered a deal with WVU and Mylan Park” now claims “There was never a deal”.**
- **The WVU administrator behind the Mylan Park scheme claims credit for finding The Pride an on-campus location.**
- **WVU rejects efforts to find answers to ongoing questions.**

Exclusive: A Vernissage Magazine Investigation – Part 8

(Editor’s note: This Saturday, April 27, West Virginia University will hold its annual Gold-Blue Spring Football Game. Members of the WVU Alumni Band will perform at the game. The Alumni Band organization was one of the driving forces behind the campaign to build WVU’s Pride of West Virginia Marching Band a new, state-of-the-art practice facility.

After several articles in this ongoing investigation were published – and as a result of significant donor and alumni outcry – the university administration scrapped a controversial plan use \$1.25 million in private contributions that donors gave to build an on-campus practice facility for the Pride of West Virginia Marching Band, and instead use that money to build an artificial turf football field for the privately-owned and politically-connected Mylan Park recreation complex.

As one university professor stated, “A move to Mylan Park would have destroyed the marching band.”

Although the Mylan Park scheme has been scuttled, Vernissage Magazine believes that continued investigation is in the public interest, to shed light on the activities and motivations of those involved in scheme that threatened a treasured state institution.)

On March 25, 2024, WVU announced the cancellation of its plan to use \$1.25 million that donors contributed to build the Pride of West Virginia marching band an on-campus practice facility to instead build an artificial turf field at privately-owned Mylan Park.

The WVU statement announcing the scuttling of the scheme promises: “We want to assure you those and future gifts will be used as originally intended,” and WVU now pledges to build the Pride Practice Facility on the university campus. The new location is WVU’s Med Fields recreation complex, adjacent to the university Medical Center.



Med Fields, new promised home of the Pride Practice Facility.

The next day, March 26, County Commissioner Tom Bloom posted on his social media site, for the first time publicly addressing the Mylan Park controversy. In his post, Bloom denied that a deal with Mylan Park ever existed:

“No money was transferred, there was never a deal,” Bloom wrote, “and all of this could have been easily rectified if they called the WVU Foundation and asked if the money was there. I can only guess that the people did not want the truth because it did not make a good story.”

On his social media site, Bloom posted parts of an interview he gave to the local newspaper. In the interview, Bloom said that when he met with WVU Dean Keith Jackson on August 22, 2023, “I was informed that Hawley Field was a non-starter. That WVU was not willing to give the land to the band for its exclusive use.”

But the fact is the Hawley Field site was never intended to be exclusive to the band. Numerous university documents state that the new practice field was *always* meant to be shared. The very first announcement of the Pride Practice Facility in November of 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.” The university’s original planning document 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.”

The playing field will be multi-purpose and WVU Athletics will share use of the field when the marching band is not using it.

Project Description, RFP202190000265 - WVU Marching Band Practice Facility, Attachment D

Bloom further claimed that Jackson, “sought out my guidance knowing my background with the band and knowing that I knew all of the parties at Mylan Park. He (Jackson) basically asked me if I could put the two of them together to explore this possibility... between WVU, the Band and Mylan Park, this was my sole involvement.”

But Bloom did not “put the two of them together.”

Documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show that, in fact, Bloom himself – along with his fellow county commissioners – met with Mylan Park Board members on August 28 of last year. Keith Jackson was not present at the meeting.

“I had a meeting today with Wren Baker, Ron Justice and the County Commissioners...”

I brought up an idea about the band field being out at Mylan.”

Tom Boom email to Keith Jackson, 3:19 pm, Monday, August 28, 2023

In his post Bloom claimed, “Locating the field at Mylan Park was in no way my idea.”

Yet immediately after the August 28 meeting, Bloom contacted Jackson. In an email obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, Bloom wrote: “I brought up an idea about the band being out at Mylan... All of this was done behind closed doors.”

Bloom says that when, on October 20, 2023, he announced to alumni and donors, “I brokered a deal with WVU and Mylan Park” people did not understand the meaning of the word ‘brokered’. He claims he meant only that he arranged to get the parties together: “This was all that I did. Several weeks later,” Bloom wrote in his post, “they contacted me to look at the Mylan field and they explained their concept.”

WVU Pride Practice Facility moves ahead at Mylan Park

“We are thrilled to see this project come to fruition,” said Tom Bloom, Monongalia County commissioner. “It is this type of partnership and collaboration that makes our county and our relationship with WVU so special.”

WVU Today, Oct. 20, 2023

“There was never a deal,” claims Tom Bloom. Yet WVU announced the deal on October 20 of last year, and even quoted Tom Bloom.

But emails obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show that Bloom met with Mylan Park board members, not “several weeks later”, but in fact just six days later.

Despite his current claim that arranging a meeting was his “sole involvement”, the documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* show Bloom was extensively involved in planning the field that those involved in the scheme intended to build at Mylan Park. Bloom exchanged numerous emails with Jackson, Mylan Park officials, and others about the planned field location, the field dimensions, and the potential use of nearby existing Mylan Park pavilions. He even sent Jackson, Mylan Park Board President Ron Justice, and WVU Director of Bands Scot Tobias an MP4 drone video of the Mylan Park field site: “I was wondering if you could use them or we could share them, once an announcement is made,” Bloom wrote. “This is a huge file, but I have a flash drive with about ten videos. Tell me what you think.”

“Enclosing the pavilion would have to be a Mylan Park question... we would have to work something out with the County Commissioners.”

“I am one of three Commissioners, and I would have to get approval.”

Tom Bloom – Emails to Keith Jackson, WVU Director of Bands Scott Tobias, Mylan Park President Ron Justice, and Mylan Park Board Directors Leah Summers and Mark Nesselroad.
7:57 am and 8:16 am, Oct. 3, 2023.

In these emails, Bloom discusses the potential use of a Mylan Park pavilion as a storage facility. Note that he writes as a Monongalia County Commissioner, and he discusses the involvement of other County Commissioners, something Bloom has repeatedly denied.

There are 66 comments on Bloom’s March 26 social media post. Many of those who commented found his claims disingenuous.

Sean Sawyer called Bloom’s post, “Political spin, only because of community pressure to do the right thing,” he wrote, “the right thing is being done.”

“I understand CYA when I see it,” Shaun Moyers commented, “and this is most definitely it.”

Marissa Ridenour was among several individuals who took issue with Bloom’s claims: “There

was never a deal, and all of this could have been easily rectified if they called the WVU Foundation and asked if the money was there," she repeated, and then wrote, "Funny how there are so many people saying that they tried to ask questions at Homecoming and they were silenced by you."

"Lots of people asked," commented Sandy Sibray, "and it took FOIA to get what little facts that have been available. If all that was needed was to ask, then why were so many of us stonewalled? Many people called the WVU Foundation ... but the details were always evaded."

"Yeah," added Jennifer Beach, "nice try but many, many of us called the Foundation and got crickets."

"There is the crux of the problem," wrote Aaron Dean. "We did ask questions, only to be told next to nothing, or even asked "What makes you think you deserve those answers." And yes, I still have the screen shot of that."

Screenshot of Tom Bloom's November 2023 chatroom response to donor Aaron Dean. Dean was concerned that he wasn't getting answers to his questions about the plan to use donations at Mylan Park.

Tom

Aaron, I do not mean to be rude, but why do they have to give answers to you...They have an obligation to WVU, and the WVU Music Dept. and the current band members... You gave money to the Foundation for a new band field....and that is what they are planning to do.....

Others questioned Bloom's statements that there was "never a deal", that "no money was transferred. And said they certainly were aware of the definition of the word "brokered".

"Brokered..." Craig Campbell wrote, "implies more than just arranging a meeting between two groups that certainly have figured out a way to meet without a middleman."

"If there was no deal, why did you announce at homecoming?" Beach asked. "If there was no deal, why all this stonewalling and name-calling?"

Band alumna Alicia Mazon concurred, remarking: "A lot of us were at Homecoming. Maybe you misunderstood how you presented this whole thing and told us to be grateful. If anyone spoke up, you yelled louder."

"How can you say there wasn't any type of deal when it was announced to alumni?" asked Kate Eakins. "It's like going to a bank with a gun out and saying you're going to rob the place, but you didn't get the money so there wasn't a fault committed since money didn't change hands. You guys did wrong, you guys got publicly called out."

"In the last 4 weeks I brokered a deal with WVU and Mylan Park..."

Tom Bloom - Post to members of the Alumni Band Social Page (Facebook), Oct. 20, 2023.

"What a load of garbage Bloom wrote." Zach Bloom (no relation) commented on an alumni site. "He's just trying to cover himself, and it looks horrible since we all know the truth,"

Mazon commented: “Did Tom black out the whole homecoming message he presented? I was there. He screamed at anyone who tried to ask a question. He said we should be grateful,”

Others called Bloom’s claim that “no money was transferred” a stalking horse.

The truth is that the WVU Foundation stated from the very beginning that the donated funds would not be transferred to Mylan Park. On November 3, 2023, WVU Foundation CEO Cynthia Roth wrote, in response to a *Vernissage Magazine* inquiry: “The funds will be disbursed for the construction of the WVU owned practice facility and will not be diverted to the Mylan Park Foundation or any other intermediary foundation.”

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WVU Foundation CEO Cynthia Ross - November 3, 2023
Letter to the editor of *Vernissage Magazine*

“To say the anger was about where the cash actually ended up is a misdirect,” commented donor A.S. “It was about what the cash was being SPENT on. We all know the cash remained with the foundation. But what we had questions about was about the ownership and control of the physical asset that was to be built with that cash. Money changing hands was never the issue. The issue was WVU building a field at Mylan Park, and the fact that Mylan Park would use it as an athletic field.”

Jeffrey Carver commented on the overall lack of transparency in the Mylan plan. Donated funds were targeted, tax-exempt organizations were involved, and elected public officials and public employees were behind the plan. Yet the details were shrouded in secrecy despite repeated requests for information from donors: “All this combines to paint a picture (real or perceived) that there was something hinky going on,” he wrote. “This yet another lesson for those people in power to remain transparent, which seems to be something that has not been learned.”

Tom

Just because the "details" are not made public, does not mean that they are not resolved....



Screenshot of Bloom’s November 2023 response to donors seeking answers. The Mylan Park scheme was kept secret for months. Even after it was announced those behind it refused to answer questions.

Band alumni Justin Click summed up the comments of many, writing:

“Oh Tom... I’m so ashamed of who you’ve become. You got caught in a dirty deal. Don’t make it worse by trying to spin this and insult our intelligence. Bow out gracefully and don’t make this any worse by acting like we’re all stupid. You announced this at homecoming in front of EVERYONE. There are press releases... official public statements from the university... and Mylan Park themselves! We live in the digital age Tom, EVERYTHING is on camera and

there's no way you can make all of us forget your behavior, actions, and language. You've stabbed us all in the back once already, don't make it worse by calling us all stupid as you spit in our eyes..."

"Ashamed is putting it lightly," added Dylan Johnson. "He's a complete embarrassment to the county and himself," adding the hashtag, "#voteanybodybutbloom2024."

At the end of the comments thread on Bloom's social media page, alumni Sean Sawyer wrote:

"Tom Bloom, please do not ghost this discussion. Reasonable requests are being made for you to make further comment, and not one that starts with "it's all everybody else's fault and I'm the hero." You owe us all that much...now's your chance..."

Tom Bloom did not respond to a single comment.

False Heroes and Praise for Mylan Park

In his March 25 letter to Pride of West Virginia supporters, WVU Dean Keith Jackson wrote: "After an October announcement outlining plans to shift the project to Mylan Park, we listened to concerns about the move to an off-campus location. Since then, I have met with various stakeholders and worked with the University to seek out a suitable on-campus site... The Med Fields, which were not previously available due to potential development, located next to Mountaineer Station on the Health Sciences Campus have been identified as the best option."

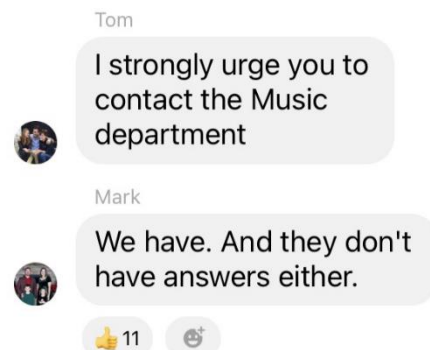
Jackson, who has consistently refused to respond to donor or media questions about the Mylan Park scheme, thanked Mylan Park, "for its continued support and for being a tremendous community partner."

In his letter, Jackson claimed, "I have met with stakeholders and listened to concerns and worked with the university to seek out a suitable on-campus location."

WVU refused to fulfill a Freedom of Information request asking for documentation of when the renewed effort to find an on-campus location for the Prode Practice Facility began, and who was involved.

But through an FOI, *Vernissage Magazine* did obtain the minutes of the the WVU Planning Committee meeting at which the Pride Practice Facility move to the on-campus Med Fields site was approved.

Dean Keith Jackson did not attend the meeting.



Screenshot: Bloom encourages donors to contact Jackson's office with questions. Donors say they were stonewalled there, too.

No Questionable Deed Goes Unrewarded...

In a late March discussion on the social site Reddit, a poster commented about reports of members of the Pride being ordered to not talk about the Mylan Park move (‘Students Shamed and Silenced’, *Vernissage Magazine*, March 22, 2024).

“The silencing of the students really infuriated me,” wrote the original poster.

Wrote another: “What these administrators did is not only against university policy, but also is illegal.”

“As a recent grad,” yet another wrote, “I can't say I'm surprised.”

According to an email obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, WVU’s Director of Bands shamed and humiliated students who openly expressed concerns about the Mylan Park plan. “...students,” the author wrote in a complaint to Keith Jackson, “were told they were an embarrassment to their school and state by their Director of Bands.”

WVU’s Director of Bands is Scott Tobias. Newly obtained documents show that Tobias was involved in the initial August 22, 2023, meeting with Keith Jackson, Tom Bloom, and WVU Foundation staffer Jennifer Jordan, where the scheme was hatched to divert marching band funds to benefit Mylan Park. “It’s on the calendar,” Tobias wrote to Jackson, Bloom, and Jordan in an email on August 16.

“...I also don't like hearing that the students, my students, were told they were an embarrassment to their school or state by their Director of Bands. That's not what I expect to hear from the school where I recommended to them to attend.”

Email to Keith Jackson from [name redacted], Oct. 24, 2023

In discussion about the silencing and humiliation of outspoken band members, Tobias became the subject of derision from commenters.

“Scott Tobias is one of the worst things to have ever happened to the School of Music,” wrote Reddit commenter Tubadude2.

“Can’t disagree,” acknowledged Kjbtrick, the original poster of the thread.

On April 24, WVU announced that Scott Tobias was named the 2024 West Virginia Bandmaster of the Year by the regional chapter of the honorary fraternity of band directors.

Finale

The Pride of West Virginia once again has been promised an on-campus site for its planned state-of-the-art practice facility.

WVU pledges, henceforth, to use donations to the Pride Practice Facility for the purpose for which they were solicited, and that donors expected.

Many of those involved in the scheme to divert Pride contributions to benefit the Mylan Park Foundation – including Dean Keith Jackson – remain silent about their motives.

But questions remain.

- Who and what initiated the scheme to use The Pride’s funds at Mylan Park?
- What was the involvement of the WVU Athletic Department, which had pledged Hawley Field to the marching band? Did the Athletic Department go back on the promise of the Hawley Field site to The Pride? If so, why?
- What oversight does the WVU Foundation have over its University Relations staff members, one of whom was intimately involved in the plot to redirect restricted donor funds to Mylan Park?
- Why are high-ranking WVU administrators permitted to sit on the boards of organizations that do extensive business with West Virginia University? And where do their loyalties lie?
- Why is WVU – a university that is tens of millions of dollars in debt, slashing entire degree programs, and laying off scores of respected educators – so keen on focusing on and investing in ‘community involvement’ with a private recreational center to the exclusion of the university’s primary mission of affordable education?
- And, last but by no means least, was the attempt to plunder the Pride of West Virginia’s donated funds just the tip of an iceberg of a broader scheme to pillage the coffers of WVU for the benefit of private interests?

In March and early April, *Vernissage Magazine* filed a series of Freedom of Information requests seeking answers to some of these questions. The requests were largely denied by WVU attorneys. Initial FOI requests filed in November 2023 yielded scores of documents. The most recent requests produced fewer than a dozen.

“It seems apparent,” as Rich McGervey commented on Tom Bloom’s social post, “no matter who made the decision, a decision was made without consulting a majority of the interested parties, especially the band members, and it’s now taken how many months for the facts to come out... which hints more and more at people doing a CYA!”

When the Alumni Band plays at WVU’s Gold-Blue Game this weekend, band supporters and alumni members will be within a few dozen yards of the Med Fields site where the university now pledges to build the long-promised on-campus Pride Practice Facility.

If Tom Bloom attends, he may find some Alumni Band members not nearly as enamored by his charm as they once were.

“As a county commissioner, I was a fan of his until his true colors came out,” one alum recently wrote in an online chat. “I hope political ads are no longer permitted...”

“The political drum needs to go,” another commented. “He’s been doing it for years, even though the Athletic Department rules say no political advertising. The Commissioner needs to get with the program and start following the rules.”

Some alumni were far less generous: “He should be banned from the Alumni Band,” one suggested.

“Regardless of personal feelings,” another replied, “I don’t think he can actually be banned... After all, he is a dues-paying member.”

“If he doesn’t get banned,” wrote another, “that drum promoting himself should never see the light of day at another Alumni Band event.”



Tom Bloom is up for re-election. But the days of drumming up votes may be over.

Upcoming in *Vernissage Magazine*:

- ***New Freedom of Information requests are filed, but now WVU refuses to cooperate. What might the university administration be hiding?***
- ***Conflicts and Influence – What is the Mylan Park Foundation? What connection do its board members have to private partnership projects with WVU and the WVU Foundation?***

The investigation continues...



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