An Open Letter to the Teton Valley Parks and Recreation District Board

Re: The Proposed Climbing Gym, Due Diligence, and the District's Responsibility to Community Recreation

Dear Board Members,

For eleven years, Teton Rock Gym (TRG) operated a nonprofit climbing facility in the Driggs City Center. Volunteers built the original gym, and TRG supplied the infrastructure, equipment, staff, and expertise to operate it. We served thousands of residents and tens of thousands of visitors, developed numerous youth programs, partnered with schools and community organizations, and created a gathering place valued throughout Teton Valley.

In May 2026, following months of government intervention in our membership, safety, and governance decisions, the City of Driggs terminated our lease. TRG dismantled its facility and suspended services it had provided for more than a decade. Now the Teton Valley Parks and Recreation District (TVPRD) is considering spending hundreds of thousands of public dollars to rebuild a climbing gym in the same space and assume responsibility for operating it.

The District has not justified this project. It participated in discussions about changing the operation of TRG's facility before our lease was terminated and failed to engage us about preserving our services. It is now advancing a publicly funded replacement through an advisory committee dominated by competitive climbing team families. Competitive climbing, and efforts to override TRG's decisions about programming, access, and organizational control, was central to the dispute that preceded our closure. The same user group whose demands drove that dispute are now central to shaping our replacement. The District has neither established a credible operating model nor demonstrated why direct government operation would serve the community better than supporting existing recreation providers. These failures warrant rejection of the current proposal and an independent examination of the District's conduct.

How We Got Here

Competitive youth climbing was central to the dispute that preceded TRG's closure. TRG offered competitive climbing for years, but traveling teams demand substantial financial resources, specialized coaching, staff time, and facility capacity. We ultimately concluded that certain competitive offerings were unsustainable alongside our broader mission of recreational climbing, youth development, and community programming.

Some families demanded more intensive competitive opportunities and established their own organizations to achieve those goals, Victor Rock Park and Team Crimpium. The disagreement was not over their right to compete. It arose when individuals repeatedly sought to act as TRG coaches and conduct independently organized competitive programs in our facility despite our decisions to the contrary.

Ordinarily, TRG might have considered renting space to another organization. But the relationship had deteriorated through months of disputes over our policies, boundary and rule violations, and efforts to exert outside control over our governance. We declined to allow individuals involved in those disputes to independently operate programs in a facility for which TRG remained legally and operationally responsible.

In August 2025, following escalating conduct raising concerns about employee safety and organizational governance, TRG suspended adult members of three families for one year. Among other activities, those individuals and their supporters sought City intervention to overturn the suspensions. The City conditioned our lease renewal on reinstating these individuals. TRG challenged the condition as unlawful, and the City withdrew it.

Sarah Johnston joined the City Council in January 2026 after running for office while her household's dispute with TRG remained unresolved and her family was asserting legal claims against us. Through Johnston, the City subsequently advanced policies governing access, disciplinary procedures, and reconsideration of prior decisions affecting those individuals. Jansen Gunderson, whose membership was suspended in August 2025 and who later joined TVPRD's Climbing Advisory Committee, was central in advancing those policies and advocating for those changes.

TRG supported fair access, nondiscrimination, and reasonable procedural safeguards. We negotiated extensively with City staff, who accepted several of our proposed revisions. Our objection was to political interference in the independent safety and disciplinary authority of an organization operating a high-risk recreation facility.

We formally raised concerns about Johnston's participation in decisions affecting her family's dispute and requested her recusal. City staff advised us that a nearly finalized lease extension and our concerns about Johnston's participation would be considered May 19. Instead, after one last refusal to allow outside competitive programs to utilize our facility, the Council terminated our tenancy without publicly addressing our recusal request or giving a reason for the termination. TRG recently filed a Notice of Claim seeking $1.39 million, alleging improper influence, unequal treatment, and retaliation. We intend to continue seeking accountability for these actions.

The District has advanced its replacement proposal without demonstrating that it examined the reasons for TRG's programming and disciplinary decisions, evaluated the City's interference in those decisions, or established safeguards to protect future operators from the same pressures. These failures underline that the District is not prepared to assume responsibility for this facility.

The District's Role in TRG's Closure

Records obtained by TRG indicate that Recreation District board member John Beller was discussing the climbing gym with City officials and interested parties, including Council Member Sarah Johnston and competitive climbing parent Jerod Pfeffer, as early as January 2026. By March, the City informed Teton Rock Gym that it was exploring a partnership with the Recreation District that could fundamentally change who operated our climbing facility in the Driggs Recreation Center. On March 9, City Administrator Doug Self explained that the proposed arrangement would require the City "to transition from a landlord-tenant structure to a contract-for-service structure." On March 27, he asked, "Should I assume that Teton Rock Gym would be interested in responding to a request for proposals to operate the gym?"

When I asked whether he meant our existing facility or a proposed future recreation center, Self clarified that the contemplated arrangement would replace our existing lease with a City-issued contract for services. He confirmed that the City Council was collaborating with the Recreation District on that change. City and District officials were apparently discussing a partnership under which TRG would be invited to compete to operate the facility it had spent eleven years building, equipping, maintaining, and operating. The City owned the building, but TRG owned the climbing walls, flooring, holds, training equipment, and other infrastructure. The District was involved in discussions about restructuring the operation of our facility before the City terminated our lease, without approaching TRG to understand our position or explore preserving our existing operation.

Although the proposed partnership was discussed in terms of the broader Driggs Recreation Center, the City renewed a four-year lease for Teton Indoor Sports Academy, a privately operated gymnastics provider in the same building, while terminating TRG's tenancy. Whatever broader restructuring officials contemplated, the resulting treatment was unequal: one provider retained an independent tenancy, while TRG faced proposed restructuring followed by termination. The District has advanced its proposal without publicly accounting for that disparity.

Despite these discussions, Beller never approached TRG to understand the dispute or explore preserving our existing services. On May 19, the City terminated our lease. Just one week later, on May 26, Mayor August Christensen emailed Self about the alterations provision in TRG's lease, asking: "Does this also mean that the Lessor can require the Lessee to keep the improvements in place?" The inquiry raised the possibility that the City could require TRG to leave improvements behind after ending its tenancy.

The pressure surrounding our property continued during dismantling. Individuals involved in the original dispute, including a Victor Rock Park board member and a member of Council Member Johnston's family, submitted complaints to the Idaho Attorney General accusing TRG staff of theft, fraud, and improper diversion of charitable assets for removing its equipment. One complainant sought an emergency injunction to freeze the organization's assets and prevent removal of the climbing infrastructure. Johnston family members also appeared during dismantling, photographed our work, posted accusations on social media, and confronted us

with allegations that we were stealing nonprofit property. We rejected these accusations. The climbing infrastructure belonged to TRG, not the City or the individuals seeking to prevent its removal.

These connections extend into the District's current proposal. Its Climbing Gym Advisory Committee includes individuals associated with Victor Rock Park and the original dispute, including former TRG board member Jansen Gunderson, whose membership was suspended in August 2025. Individuals connected to disagreements over TRG's governance, programming, and access decisions are now central to helping shape a publicly funded climbing facility in the same location.

Only after the City terminated our lease did Beller approach TRG. At that meeting, he asked no questions about the dispute or our account of it. He told our Executive Director "you have dirt on you now," and said the District would be happy to accept a donation of our equipment. A board member of a newly formed recreation taxing district, established with the stated intention of supporting nonprofits and existing recreation providers, responded to the loss of an eleven-year community institution by dismissing its director and expressing interest in its assets. I understood his remark as a judgment based on accusations he had not asked us to address. At that meeting, he offered no assistance in preserving our services, yet welcomed the prospect of obtaining the equipment that made those services possible.

This sequence establishes a serious failure of judgment and process. The District participated in discussions about the facility's future before TRG's lease was terminated, did not seek our perspective or meaningfully pursue preservation of our services, and subsequently placed individuals connected to the underlying dispute in positions to help shape a publicly funded replacement. The Board should condemn that failure and commission an independent investigation to establish the full extent of the District's involvement and the responsibility of individual officials.

An Unsubstantiated Operating Model and Unresolved Governance Failures

The District is contemplating a major expansion of its responsibilities: constructing a specialized facility and assuming its staffing, insurance, safety, maintenance, programming, and financial obligations. The publicly presented feasibility work we reviewed was developed primarily by a committee of interested climbing users and does not include an independent professional evaluation of the operating model.

The District entrusted development of this proposal primarily to a committee dominated by competitive climbing families, including individuals connected to the disputes that preceded TRG's closure. It has not demonstrated that the committee's direct interests were adequately balanced by independent expertise, meaningful consultation with experienced operators, or consideration of competing recreation priorities. The result is a proposal shaped by a narrow

group of interested users, supported by financial assumptions that have not survived even modest scrutiny. This is not an adequate foundation for committing substantial public resources to a specialized facility.

The committee's financial projections illustrate the limitations of this process. In just 24 days, its projected annual operating surplus fell from $41,612 to $2,917, a margin of barely 1.1% on $267,205 in revenue. Its revised report also disclosed projected startup support requirements ranging from approximately $42,000 to $181,000, depending on membership growth.

Its $347,700 construction estimate averages vendor proposals with different scopes, defers important improvements, and provides little contingency for unresolved costs. The operating model assumes membership levels exceeding TRG's historical experience, relies on unverified pricing and demand assumptions, and does not meaningfully test competition from a reopened TRG or free offerings such as Victor Rock Park. These findings are detailed in the accompanying Technical and Financial Assessment of the Proposed TVPRD Climbing Gym.

The District is now preparing to seek professional proposals for a facility whose operating model has not been established. Seeking climbing wall designs does not establish membership demand, staffing requirements, programming feasibility, or long-term financial sustainability. Nor does it establish why direct District operation is justified. Advancing design procurement before resolving those questions risks using a construction process to create momentum for a project that has not passed a credible feasibility review.

Equally concerning is the governance structure. The advisory committee includes individuals involved in efforts to overturn TRG's programming and disciplinary decisions. They are now helping shape a publicly funded replacement whose programming, access, and scheduling rules could favor their own teams and organizations, without demonstrated safeguards against that influence. Who will actually operate the gym? Who will decide whether competitive teams receive dedicated training time, whether outside organizations can conduct programs, and how limited space is allocated among recreational users, youth programs, and community partners?

Who will have final authority when a participant disputes a safety or disciplinary decision? Will professional staff be empowered to enforce rules, or will elected officials and influential users intervene? These are the same conflicts that contributed to TRG's closure. The District is preparing to inherit them without demonstrating that it understands their origins or has established safeguards against their recurrence. Changing the operator does not eliminate these responsibilities. It transfers them to the District.

The District Has Not Justified Direct Operation

The District has never established why it should become the owner and operator of this facility in the first place. That failure is especially troubling given the campaign's emphasis on supporting existing recreation organizations. Direct facility operation requires its own

justification. The District has not demonstrated why this expansion of its role is necessary, financially sound, or preferable to supporting independent providers.

Rather than beginning with an impartial evaluation of Teton Valley's recreation needs and the available ways to meet them, the District appears to have organized its process around a particular outcome: rebuilding a climbing gym in the Driggs City Center under District operation. Its reports do not demonstrate a serious comparison with independent operators, nonprofit partnerships, private investment, or alternative uses of the space. The Senior Center's multi-use concept and other community proposals have not received comparable evaluation. The District is advancing one solution without first establishing that it is the best one.

Teton Rock Gym has not ceased to exist. We remain an active nonprofit, retain substantial specialized equipment and experienced staff, and are evaluating viable opportunities to reopen. Yet the District is advancing a publicly subsidized replacement without demonstrating that it seriously evaluated preserving or partnering with the organization that built the original facility. Its proposal could place public resources in direct competition with an established nonprofit seeking to restore the services government intervention helped displace. The District has offered no convincing justification for why taxpayers should finance that outcome.

The Board Should Reject This Proposal

The District has failed to establish a credible basis for this project. Its advisory process relied heavily on individuals connected to the disputes surrounding TRG's closure, raising serious questions about impartiality and conflicts of interest in the development of a publicly funded replacement. Its financial projections deteriorated dramatically under revision, its operating assumptions remain unverified, and it has not meaningfully evaluated competing alternatives. These are not minor details to be corrected after construction planning begins. They are fundamental failures in the process used to justify the proposed investment.

The District should not proceed with project-specific procurement before independently evaluating the operating model and alternatives. Commissioning professional designs will not resolve the absence of a credible operating model, establish the District's competence to manage a specialized facility, or answer why direct government operation is preferable to supporting independent recreation providers. The Board should reject the committee's proposal rather than use further procurement to advance a project whose underlying justification remains unproven.

The District also owes the public an accounting of its own conduct. Beller participated in discussions about the facility's future before TRG's lease was terminated, asked no questions about our account at our subsequent meeting, and expressed interest in our equipment without offering a plan to preserve our services. He has subsequently been central in advancing the publicly funded replacement. This conduct demonstrates a failure of the judgment and impartiality his public role requires and is incompatible with the District's stated commitment to supporting existing recreation providers. Beller should resign from the Board. His departure

would not eliminate the need for an independent investigation into the District's involvement before TRG's closure, including his communications with City officials and individuals involved in the dispute, his disclosures to fellow directors, and his role in developing the replacement proposal and its advisory committee. That investigation should also examine whether appropriate governance and conflict-of-interest safeguards were followed. Beller should have no role in determining its scope, oversight, or findings.

This is not a community that lacked a climbing gym. For eleven years, TRG sustained the climbing operation and supplied its infrastructure, equipment, staff, and expertise. It provided broad programming, established partnerships, and offered eligible members 24-hour access. Government intervention was directly responsible for the loss of that facility. The proposed replacement has not demonstrated comparable access, programming capacity, financial sustainability, or professional operating expertise.

The remaining District directors should call for Beller's resignation, reject the current proposal, and commission an independent examination of the District's involvement before TRG's closure. They should open the future of the space to serious consideration of independent providers and broader community needs, and publicly explain how direct facility operation advances the campaign's emphasis on supporting existing recreation organizations.

Teton Valley should not be asked to finance a replacement that has not demonstrated comparable services or sustainability after government interference helped dismantle an established community asset. The District has not earned the public's confidence in this project, and it has not made the case for spending public money on it.

Sincerely,

Jacob Yufa
Executive Director
Teton Rock Gym