

Bryan's takeover of BTU finalized

Posted: Wednesday, April 25, 2012 12:00 am

By MATTHEW WATKINS

matthew.watkins@theeagle.com

The Bryan City Council's move to take more control of its city-owned electric company was finalized Wednesday by a unanimous vote.

During a morning meeting, the council approved the second reading of an ordinance that returned many of the duties previously handled by the Bryan Texas Utilities board of directors. The council will now control the hiring and firing of BTU employees, handle major land acquisition and approve of contracts BTU makes with the Texas Municipal Power Authority.

The council also affirmed that BTU General Manager Dan Wilkerson reports to the city manager.

There was no discussion of the issue, only a quick vote. That was a far cry from the first reading of the ordinance Tuesday night, when council members defended the decision before a packed house.

Council members said that they respect the work of the BTU board and approved the ordinance simply to bring city staff together. But board members expressed frustration Tuesday night and some expressed doubt over whether it was worth it to have a board moving forward.

The only BTU board member at Wednesday's meeting was Bryan businessman Chris Peterson, who took a more conciliatory tone.

"For the most part, I think it has been just a little overblown," he said, adding that the board will still have influence over BTU's operations. "It just changes the power and the authority. The organization is the same."

Some residents who spoke at Tuesday night's meeting said they worried that the city council gaining more influence over BTU might cause rates to rise. When faced with budget difficulties, the council might choose to raise electricity rates instead of raising taxes, they said.

Peterson echoed some council members comments from Tuesday by saying he doesn't expect that to happen.

"I know a lot of people are having a lot of consternation, but I just know that when the dust settles that not a lot will change," he said. "It is not going to change the rates and the lights are still going to come on."

The BTU board was created more than a decade ago in response to the state's deregulation of the

electrical market. Since then, many city managers have clashed with the agency over the transparency of BTU's budget.

The shift in policy comes after questions were raised about the future of Interim City Manager Kean Register. Register is a former BTU executive but was tapped to lead the city after the resignation of David Watkins.

Register has always said that he hopes to go back to the utility company, but his old job was eliminated in recent months. He was injured in a motocross accident over the weekend and wasn't present for Tuesday and Wednesday's meetings.