

Dan Wilkerson retiring as BTU general manager

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The shake-up in governance at Bryan Texas Utilities continued this week with the retirement of longtime general manager Dan Wilkerson and resignation of the majority of the city-owned electric company's governing board.

Wilkerson and four board members submitted resignation letters to the city on Tuesday. Wilkerson will remain at BTU until June 30. The board members — Emanuel Glockzin, Hank McQuaide, Ralph Davila and Ronnie Craig — are staggering their exits to allow the Bryan City Council to appoint replacements and continue to have a quorum.

The resignations come less than a month after the Bryan City Council greatly reduced the autonomy and authority of BTU and its independent board. On April 25, the council voted to remove the seven-member board's ability to acquire land by eminent domain and hire and fire employees. Then on May 1, the chief financial officer position at BTU was merged into the top financial officer position at City Hall.

Glockzin, the BTU board chairman, cited those changes as one of the main reasons for the resignations.

“We all felt like we kind of lost the purpose of being there,” he said.

That frustration was exacerbated this week when board members learned that the council was planning to discuss at its Tuesday meeting a plan to allow residents to opt out of using “smart” electrical meters, which BTU bought and installed in about 48,000 homes and businesses across the city last year, Glockzin said. The idea was rejected by a 6-to-1 vote, but Glockzin said he and other board members were surprised that they were not consulted or notified before the meeting's agenda was released.

“There wasn't any communication between any of us board members and the council,” Glockzin said.

Wilkerson declined to comment through a spokesman, but his resignation letter made no mention of Glockzin's complaints. It's unclear what role they had, if any, in his exit. He has presided over BTU since 1984 and was rumored to be preparing for retirement even before the recent changes.

In his resignation letter, he said it was an “honor and privilege” to serve the BTU customers.

“I have seen many things improve over the years, and I believe the employees of BTU who brought about those changes are the best in the country,” he wrote. “I am proud to have been able to serve

with them. It has also been a real pleasure to work with all of the fine board members who served their community.”

During his career, Wilkerson established himself as one of the state’s leading experts on municipal power. He also enjoyed great power in the city government ever since the state electrical market was deregulated in the 1990s and the city created a board of directors to oversee BTU’s operations.

But in recent years he clashed with City Hall. Former City Manager David Watkins publicly complained in 2010 that Wilkerson wasn’t providing the city with adequate budget information. Watkins resigned under pressure, but his fight spurred a change in state law that made budget information about municipal power companies public record.

Watkins’ replacement as city manager was BTU group manager Kean Register, who has long been considered the leading candidate to replace Wilkerson. Register has served as city manager for 20 months, but only in the interim position because he said he planned to eventually return to BTU.

Wilkerson’s planned retirement raises questions about Register’s future. Register said as recently as last month that he still hopes to become BTU’s general manager. But, since then, the autonomy of BTU has been greatly reduced.

“What Kean is going to do now I don’t really know,” Glockzin said. “If he goes back to BTU, he is going to be answering to the city manager, whoever that may be, and I am not sure that he is going to want to do that.”

Register didn’t address those questions in a statement released Wednesday thanking Wilkerson for his service to the city: “Dan has been a true servant to BTU’s customers. In my opinion, Dan is without peer in the municipal electric industry.”

Mayor Jason Bienski said he hasn’t discussed the future with Register because “there wasn’t an opening in the general manager’s position until we found out about it today.” But council members have said for months that they would offer Register the top city job if he wanted it.

“My personal opinion is I’d like to see Kean stay on as city manager,” Bienski said. “That hasn’t changed since day one.”

Bienski said he also hopes to keep the BTU board in place. In addition to the four board members who resigned Tuesday, two others will reach the end of their terms in the coming months and don’t plan to reapply for the positions. That leaves only one member, Chris Peterson, who plans to stay on the board long-term, said Glockzin, the chairman of the board.

“The board was established to take politics out [of BTU’s management],” Glockzin said. “That has all changed now. Politics is back in.”

Peterson, meanwhile, said he hopes some of the resigning board members change their minds.

“At the end of the day this is about the citizens of Bryan and what is good for the customers,” Peterson said. “This much transition at one time is not good for the customers as a whole and for BTU. Somebody has got to stick around and handle this transition and we need experienced board members to do that.”