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GSU case near completion with \$17 million increase

AUSTIN (AP) — The rate-making marathon that is the Gulf States Utilities case appears ready to end Wednesday with a net increase of about \$17 million.

The Texas Public Utility Commission took several votes in the case Tuesday, leaving one decision for today on whether the increase should be imposed at one time or phased in. The last vote was postponed until the commission staff could calculate exact numbers.

Kim McMurray, GSU spokesman, said the increase apparently would raise monthly residential bills for 1,000 kwh from the current \$74.06 to about \$81.

The Beaumont-based utility, which said it was headed toward possible bankruptcy at the time, filed in November 1986 for a \$144 million rate increase. The heart of the case was the company's \$3.1 billion investment in the River Bend nuclear plant in Louisiana.

The commission decided earlier this year to prevent the company

from passing to customers \$1.4 billion of those costs, but said it would give GSU another shot, at a subsequent hearing, at proving the money was well-spent.

"We think we did prove it up," McMurray said. "We think we will be able to prove up most or all of that amount."

The commission's approximate \$17 million bottom line is roughly the same as proposed by PUC examiners, although the commission and the examiners took different routes to reach it. The gross increase in annual revenues is about \$87 million, but that includes a \$39.9 million emergency increase that has been in effect since last April and does not reflect a \$30 million refund for fuel-cost adjustments.

McMurray said the Texas increase, plus a \$92 million increase ordered in Louisiana by that state's courts, would put GSU in an improved financial condition.

"At least in the short term we hope that this will allow us to borrow

money at reasonable rates," he said, predicting GSU would need loans in May. "We've got some fairly large bills that have to be paid then."

GSU has projected a \$189 million shortfall for 1988.

The marathon case, longest in commission history, on Tuesday continued to produce heated differences among the commissioners on some issues. Commissioner Jo Campbell, who dissented on many of the key votes in the case, lashed out at the company Tuesday, likening its officials, on one specific issue, to "spoiled brats."

"There is a limit to what we expect ratepayers to do to keep the company afloat," she said during the meeting.

After the session, Campbell said, "Bankruptcy is always a serious subject, but I think I have tried consistently to take the position that we can't save the company from bankruptcy if it's going to be bent on spending its way there."

Budget cuts affect Houston's zoo

HOUSTON (AP) — The latest victim of Houston's budget woes is a popular petting zoo for children that will have to close down by next month, officials said.

Although the Discovery Zoo will be closed this summer, it could reopen in the fall if there is enough money provided in the fiscal 1989 budget, Don Olson, Parks and Recreation director, said Monday.

"We are just too understaffed now to keep it open," Olson said. "If there was any way to keep it open, I would."

About 2 million people visit the Houston Zoo each year, and about two-thirds of them go to the petting zoo, Marilyn McBirney, the Discovery Zoo's senior keeper, said.

The city is trying to curb spending as it tries to deal with another budget

shortfall. During the past three years, the petting zoo's staff has been reduced from 18 to 11 keepers as part of other budget-trimming efforts.

Like most city departments, parks and recreations has been held well below its 1988 budget of nearly \$20.2 million, and Mayor Kathy Whitmire has ordered another \$567,000 cut by the end of the year.

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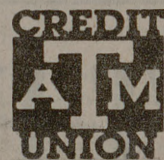
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