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Courtney William, a junior food science major, pulls weeds from the flower beds in front of Floriculture Building and Greenhouse.

Legislature considers plan to deregulate utilities

Local utility company, BTU, and other private companies hope to educate public, lawmakers.

BY AMANDA SMITH
 The Battalion

To compete or not to compete — that is the question legislators will be asking in regard to electrical utilities in Texas, as the 76th session of the Texas Legislature considers a bill filed last week by members of the Texas House.

Rep. Steve Wolens (D-Dallas) and Rep. Warren Chisum (R-Pampa) have proposed to restructure the electric industry in Texas to allow for retail competition. If the bill passes, Texas residents could begin choosing their electricity provider by 2002.

While independently-owned power sources, like Southwestern Electric of Marlin and BTU of Bryan already operate privately, the doors have not been opened completely to competition, a press release from the Association of Electric Companies of Texas said.

The Association of Electric Companies of Texas currently represents investor-owned utilities, including Central and South West Corporation, El Paso Electric Co., Energy Texas, Houston Industries Inc., Southwestern Public Service Co., Texas-New Mexico Power Co. and Texas Utilities.

BTU, previously called Bryan Utilities, generates

and provides power to Wilkerson said the deregulation would reduce the current utility rates Texas residents pay.

Dan Wilkerson, director of BTU, said he is working to inform legislators of the need to regulate the utilities industry in Texas.

"We have worked with the legislators about how we are different from an investor-owned company," Wilkerson said. "We have been educating legislators and others. We will be the same with our customers."

Wilkerson said he is concerned customers will be overwhelmed by the decision of choosing a utility provider.

Ray Beavers, CEO of Southwest Rural Electric Association, said there is no doubt deregulation of electric utilities industry could cut costs.

But Beavers said deregulation could have a negative impact on rural electric providers and their customers.

"The legislature has to be real careful," said. "My basic feeling is the electric utility industry is a natural monopoly because it is a capital intensive industry. Major utilities have provided service for a time and gotten bigger."

Southwest Rural Electric Association, an electric utilities company founded in Oklahoma in 1907, provides electricity to rural areas in Texas and Oklahoma.

Beavers said he prefers the current system but does not believe the changes are necessary.

"The present way of providing electric service is the best way as I see it," Beavers said. "It is what the private sector is requesting, we make sure that everything is protected, and companies are not left picking up the pieces."

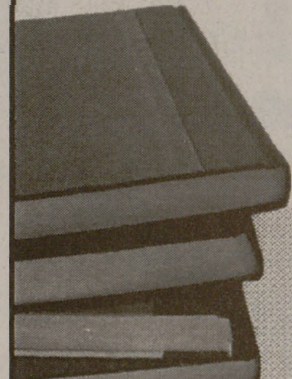
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