

Council president rejects calling Wednesday meeting on JEA sale, so the mayor calls one himself

By Nate Monroe

Posted Feb 12, 2018 at 10:15 AM

Updated Feb 13, 2018 at 11:20 PM

“A decision this large should not be made by politicians who will gain an open checkbook to spend on buildings that will have a plaque with their name on it,” Anna Brosche says

City Council President Anna Brosche and Mayor Lenny Curry issued dueling edicts Monday over a highly anticipated report that will put a dollar value on JEA, the city-owned utility that could be put up for sale, opening another rift between the heads of the city’s executive and legislative branches.

Brosche rebuffed a request from JEA’s chief executive officer to hold an unusual joint meeting of the council and JEA board of directors Wednesday to hear the results of the valuation report, seeking instead to slow down the process of a potential JEA sale and criticizing the way Curry has handled the issue.

Curry responded in kind: He called the special meeting Wednesday himself.

The question now is whether City Council members will take any action after seeing the report.

Brosche said the mayor’s office had asked if she was willing to consider legislation at the Wednesday meeting to move the process of a potential sale forward, which she rejected and criticized as “premature.”

“Essentially, the Mayor’s Office is asking City Council to consider passing legislation as an emergency, upon introduction, without the public involvement afforded by the normal legislative process and without an appropriate analysis of

and response to the final valuation report by the Council Auditor,” she wrote to JEA CEO Paul McElroy.

Legislation that is put on the fastest emergency cycle can be introduced and voted on in the same day. Normally, a bill must move through a five-week process that includes vetting by council committees.

“In considering your request and the requests of the Mayor’s administration, it is important to note the City Council did not initiate an analysis of JEA’s value,” she wrote.

Brian Hughes, Curry’s chief of staff, said he had not seen Brosche’s letter, a copy of which he said was not delivered to Curry’s office.

Asked about her assertion the mayor was pushing for an emergency-cycle legislation vote Wednesday, Hughes denied it. He said there was a “spitball-type” discussion about something that “lays out a time line and next steps,” but nothing that would ask council members to commit to any definitive action.

Hughes also questioned how Brosche’s commitment to transparency lines up with her decision to cancel a meeting where “everyone would see the report at the same time.” He said Curry continues to believe a meeting should take place Wednesday.

A JEA spokeswoman said McElroy did not have a response to Brosche’s letter.

JEA released a draft version of the valuation report last week. Though it did not include a dollar figure value of JEA — there were blank spaces in the report that will presumably be filled in for the final version — it called the potential sale of JEA possibly the “largest and most complex municipal privatization in the United States.” It also said the city should reach a “consensus” on whether to pursue privatization before going out into the market.

To that end, City Councilman John Crescimbeni has proposed that voters should have the chance to weigh in through a referendum, which Brosche supports.

Brosche also said she wants the council auditor to update a years-old report on a potential JEA sale.

Tom Petway — one of Curry's closest financial backers — put the entire sale process in motion last year when he suggested in his final meeting as a JEA board member that the utility explore the option, a move Curry quickly supported publicly.

Curry, who views himself as a reform mayor, is widely believed to be a proponent of a sale.

In an op-ed that ran Sunday in the Times-Union, Brosche said City Hall should be "deliberate in this process before we start a spending spree on special interest projects benefiting a privileged few.

"A decision this large should not be made by politicians who will gain an open checkbook to spend on buildings that will have a plaque with their name on it."

Nate Monroe: (904) 359-4289