

Matt Bentke takes helm at Bluebonnet

Brenham native, 24/7 advocate for co-op members, embraces 'opportunity to lead an amazing group of people'

By Janet Wilson

Matt Bentke, a Brenham native and respected electric utility industry leader, has been named Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's general manager, stepping into the job held by Mark Rose, who retired after 14 years as the co-op's top executive.

Bluebonnet's Board of Directors voted unanimously in July to hire Bentke, who had served as Bluebonnet's deputy general manager since 2014 and already was responsible for the co-op's day-to-day operations. He has worked at the co-op for 16 years.

"I am proud that we have the depth of talent to allow Matt to move up," said Bluebonnet Board Chairman Ben Flecher of Somerville. "He has the trust and support of the organization and is already a proven leader. He was a natural and easy choice to be the next general manager at Bluebonnet."

Mike Williams, president and CEO of the Texas Electric Cooperatives trade association, said Bentke "is authentic, a real person who wants to make a difference in the world and do that in the communities Bluebonnet serves."

"He's a homegrown talent and that's so important to who we are as electric cooperatives," Williams said. "He is confident but also humble. Bluebonnet has done some great things, and I think they are poised to be even greater with the kind of inspired leadership Matt will provide."

Bluebonnet was created in 1939 and provides power to more than 90,000 meters in 14 Central Texas counties. It is one of the largest electric cooperatives in Texas. The service area covers 3,800 square miles stretching from the suburbs of Austin to the outskirts of Houston and south to San Marcos.

It's an area Bentke knows well.

Bentke, 43, attended Brenham High School, where he was an accomplished athlete. He played on a state championship baseball team, was drafted by the San Diego Padres in the major league baseball draft in 1991, and

played on the Blinn Junior College World Series Baseball team in 1992. He attended Texas A&M University, where he graduated in 1995 with a degree in Business Administration – Management.

Bentke joined Bluebonnet in 2000, rising through the ranks as manager of finance, chief operating officer and deputy general manager. During his career, he supervised or managed every department at Bluebonnet. He also has represented Bluebonnet on organizations within the region, including as vice chairman of the board of directors of both the GenTex Power Corporation, which owns the Lost Pines 1 Power Plant in Bastrop, and the Brenham Economic Development Foundation. He is secretary/treasurer of the Lower Colorado River Authority's Rates and Resources Council.

"Matt Bentke is a man of tremendous character and integrity," LCRA General Manager Phil Wilson said. "I'm extremely excited about the depth of experience he brings to Bluebonnet with his focus on his co-op members. Matt is the face of where public power is going in terms of pragmatic problem-solving in the 21st century."

Bentke and his wife, Rachel Bentke, a licensed professional counselor, live in Brenham and have two children, a daughter and son, who are also budding athletes.

Bentke's daughter, Brooke, 11, loves art and design, plays softball and is on a select volleyball team in Houston; his son, Drake, 8, prefers math to art, plays basketball and is on a select baseball team in Brenham.

Bentke has deep roots with the company he now leads. The co-op has provided power to his family's Washington County farm for more



than seven decades. The farm, where his mother grew up, was established by his ancestors when they arrived from Germany.

Commitment to the co-op, its members and the communities it serves is paramount to him.

"This is the region of Texas where I was born and raised," Bentke said. "I am excited to have the opportunity to serve members who are as passionate about this region, and the communities within

which we live, as I am."

During Rose's tenure, Bluebonnet was recognized as one of the most technologically advanced and innovative utilities – big or small, public or private. Bluebonnet's technology and its employees' ability to use it effectively and efficiently during the most challenging conditions, such as fires, floods and widespread power outages, was a hallmark of Rose's leadership.



Sarah Beal photos

Matt Bentke (left), in front of Bluebonnet's headquarters in Bastrop, is the co-op's fifth general manager. His executive team members (above), live in the co-op's service area and have close ties to the community. From left: Eric Kocian, engineer/system operations officer, has been with Bluebonnet since 2003 and lives in La Grange. Elizabeth Kana, chief financial officer, lives in Bastrop and has been with Bluebonnet since 2002; Sarah Newman-Altamirano, Bluebonnet's general counsel since 2011, lives in Bastrop; Rachel Ellis, chief administrative officer (seated), has been with Bluebonnet since 1997 and lives in Giddings; Bentke lives in Brenham and has been with Bluebonnet for 16 years; Johnny Sanders, manager of community and development services (seated), has been with Bluebonnet since 2003 and lives in Bastrop; and Grant Gutierrez, chief information officer/controller, joined Bluebonnet in 2005 and lives in Smithville.

Upon announcing his retirement, Rose said, "Matt has been my partner in everything we have accomplished these past 14 years. He is ready, his team is ready, and they will do an outstanding job leading Bluebonnet."

Bentke is the co-op's fifth general manager. His management style embraces a collective approach to problem-solving, which has served him well during three years as Bluebonnet's deputy general manager.

From the Bluebonnet Board of Directors that provides oversight of the organization to the newest member service representative or field crew employee, Bentke views everyone in the organization as equally important to the co-op's success. The co-op has more than 280 employees.

"As general manager, I have the opportunity to lead an amazing group of people who work for this organization and care about serving Bluebonnet's members day in and day out," Bentke said.

"We are very proud of the diversity among our entire Bluebonnet team," he said. "Not just the blend of women and men, but the fact that they live and work within the Bluebonnet area. When we make a financial decision or have an outage, we understand that it affects members, who are also our friends, neighbors and family."

Communication is important, both to Blue-

bonnet members and Bluebonnet employees.

"We must be able to have fair and professional conversations, even when topics are difficult to discuss," he said. "One of the most important parts of communication though is listening. We must listen to our members in order to serve them to the best of our ability."

Bentke recognizes the challenges of a fast-growing region that is evolving, and believes his ability to motivate a team to work toward a common goal will benefit all co-op members.

"Our great challenge is to manage that growth in the best interests of all Bluebonnet members," he said. "We must continue to research and adapt to the changing needs of our membership, to deliver services our members desire at a competitive cost that they find value in."

Bentke said he is dedicated to doing what is right for the members of Bluebonnet and the communities the co-op serves and that under his leadership, the co-op will continue to provide safe, reliable, competitively priced power.

"Each and every day, each and every night, you have someone representing your interest, and striving to do what is always in the best interest of the co-op," he said. "Whether it's safety, reliability, cost or other services that members respect, we are here to be their advocate." ■