



Matt Saxe of Matt Saxe Chevrolet Buick, left, has purchased Belle Plaine Chevrolet Buick. Joe Itman, right, who operated and co-owned Belle Plaine Chevrolet Buick for almost three years, will remain in Belle Plaine as a department manager for Saxe.

Small Towns a Way of Life for New Auto Dealership Owner

by Dan Ruud

He comes from a small mountain town that to this day boasts of having the only traffic light in the county. That would be the city of Dushore in Sullivan County, Penn.

Since leaving Dushore, Matt Saxe of Matt Saxe Chevrolet Buick in Belle Plaine (formerly Belle Plaine Chevrolet Buick) has made working for small-town auto dealerships a way of life, ranging from Gaylord, Mich., to Sauk City, Wis. Now, he has landed in Belle Plaine, where for the first time in his life he is sole owner of a dealership.

"This is everything I've dreamed of, and fortunately, Mr. (Steve) Rubin and (Joe) Itman were kind enough to sell me this dealership," said Saxe, who closed on the sale last Tuesday.

Saxe is the third occupant of the six-year-old building, which is located near the Cambria building just south of Highway 169. Belle Plaine Chevrolet Buick purchased the facility partners Steve Rubin, Paul Rubin and Lee Gatrell, the latter three of whom continued to focus their efforts on the group's superstore – White Bear Lake Pontiac/Buick.

Itman will remain in Belle Plaine working with Saxe as manager of the Fleet and Com-

mercial Department.

"I'm very fortunate that Joe is going to stick around," said Saxe, adding that Service Manager Scott Anger is also staying. "Joe and Scott have done a nice job here and I'd like to continue to grow this business. I feel there is some solid growth opportunity here."

Meanwhile, Steve Steinhagen is staying on as service advisor, as well as most of the other two dozen Belle Plaine Chevrolet/Buick employees.

"It's the same crowd. I brought no one else in but myself. I'm the only new guy," Saxe said.

The dealership will continue to sell and service new Chevrolets and Buicks and all models of pre-owned vehicles.

Saxe, who has already found a home in Belle Plaine, will be joined here soon by his wife, Melissa, and their three children – Clayton, 11, Ella 22 months, and Gus, 4 months.

"It's very important to me to live in the same community as where you do business," Saxe said.

After graduating from Sullivan County High School in 1991, Saxe decided it was time to branch out on his own.

"I was the son of a dairy farmer but I wasn't the kind of kid who wanted to milk cows, so I decided to go into the car busi-

ness," Saxe joked.

He enrolled at Northwood University in Midland, Mich., where he earned a four-year degree in marketing and management with an emphasis on auto dealership management. He graduated in 1995.

By then however, Saxe was already selling cars for a dealership in Midland, where he went to work full-time after graduation.

"The owner (Bob Feeny) opened a second store in Gaylord, Mich., and he said, "Matt, you're my guy to run it,"" Saxe said.

Several years later, Saxe decided to accept a job with Ballweg Automotive Group in Wisconsin, where he helped owners Darlene Ballweg and Jason Brickl open and operate five dealerships in the state, including two Chevrolet, one Ford, one Toyota and one Mercedes. The last two years of his near decade in Wisconsin were spent at Wausaw.

"I've worked for some good people as a partner for all these years and it was time for me to step out and buy a business of my own," Saxe said. "I'm a small town guy and the business had to be in a small town. Then this opportunity came along. Everything I've ever worked for has been invested in Belle Plaine."