

## Princeton-area property sought for solar farm operation

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A Chicago environmental firm is looking for property owners in the Princeton area who may be interested in leasing land for solar-farm operations.

UPC Solar, a subsidiary of the larger UPC Energy Group, is specifically interested in 40- to 60-hectare farms along Township Road 2 that are east of the village, Blandford-Blenheim Mayor Kenn Howling said.

According to Howling, the company has permission from the Ontario Power Authority to build 10-megawatt operations in this area, which is adjacent to an existing transmission line that would connect any solar farms to the grid. Given the lease structure favoured by UPC Solar, Howling said the opportunity could prove "fairly lucrative" for participating farmers. The company favours long-term leases that provide "escalating, guaranteed revenue" to the property owners.

"He did give me a rough idea of how they work it," Howling said about his meeting with Bob Leah, UPC's director of business development.

The company could not be reached for comment on its interest in the area by press time.

Howling suggested that any of the township's few remaining tobacco farmers would be wise to investigate the leasing opportunities with UPC Solar. At the moment, though, the county is still in the midst of approving a series of provincially driven official plan amendments, including one that would allow photovoltaic development on agricultural lands. These amendments, which are necessary for later approvals, will likely be brought to county council by late summer or early fall.

"There's a good chance we're going to have solar-panel farming in the township," Howling said.

According to UPC Solar materials, its solar farms have very little impact on the actual lands, which can easily be returned to their previous state after the expiration of a lease. The company uses "screw piers," which look exactly like giant screws, instead of concrete mounting when installing their solar panels arrays, an approach that minimizes "land disruption."

The interest in Blandford-Blenheim is not without precedent in Oxford County. Earlier in the year, county council approved a one-hectare solar farm on the 16th Line of East Zorra-Tavistock Township. There have also been several recent announcements about other new solar farm developments in other parts of the province, including operations in Sarnia and the Kingston area.