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## Solar farm blooming near Lexington County towns

BY TIM FLACH

New solar farms are sprouting near Batesburg-Leesville and Gilbert. The pair – each with 230,000 panels – will start supplying power for homes within a year for different utilities.

Both projects reflect Pine Gate Renewables' view that South Carolina's climate is "ideal" for conversion of sunshine into electricity, company spokeswoman Tami von Isakovics said.

Pine Gate already has developed two other solar farms near Pelion, with another in Lexington County

possibly following the one near Gilbert soon, she said.

County Councilman Larry Brigham of Batesburg-Leesville expects to see more solar farms settle in the area eventually, possibly squeezing out the arrival of neighborhoods that planners predict will blossom in the largely rural western half of the 758-square-mile county by 2050.

Solar farms could be "taking over large tracts that homes could go on," he said. "The question is which way the pendulum is going to go."

Construction for one solar farm is underway on a 480-acre site in

Saluda County a mile northwest of Batesburg-Leesville, with a transmission station located off Summerland Avenue on the north edge of town. That operation should start generating power for Dominion Energy next spring, von Isakovics said.

Work is due to start this fall on an 825-acre site on Crout Pond Road a mile south of Gilbert for the other solar farm that will supply power for Santee Cooper by mid-2022, she said.

At a minimum, each will generate enough electricity to supply at least 10,000 homes apiece, according to

estimates by the Solar Energy Industries Association. The one in Saluda County will have slightly larger power generation capacity, able to produce 101 megawatts compared to 93 megawatts at the one near Gilbert, von Isakovics said.

Brigham pushed successfully for adoption of expanded landscape buffers around solar farms in Lexington County to screen them better from the view of passing motorists. A 50-foot buffer will surround the one near Gilbert while the roadside buffer in Saluda County is a 25-foot width.

Federal officials are encouraging

more solar farms to help reduce pollution from other types of fuel such as coal long used to produce electricity.

South Carolina could become a leader in that expansion, von Isakovics said. Pine Gate, headquartered in Asheville, N.C., already has 19 solar farms in operation across the state, she said.

Officials in both Lexington and Saluda counties are providing property tax breaks for the projects. Supporters say the fees will be more than taxes from farms while solar farms don't require significant increases in public safety services as new homes do.