

Monday, February 9, 2009

# Illinois solar firm SmartSpark moves to Austin

Austin Business Journal - by [Christopher Calnan](#) Staff writer

**An Austin technology executive is moving his solar energy company's headquarters from Illinois to Austin to take advantage of the local worker pool coupled with the regional emphasis on renewable energy.**

Ron Van Dell, CEO of **SmartSpark Energy Systems Inc.**, said he's been based in Austin for a decade and took over SmartSpark's top post in November. The company has been developing a micro-inverter for solar panels since 2004 and Van Dell expects to release the product within a year with the help of local tech engineers and marketers with experience in electronics.

"We want to grow with that base of skills that are already in Austin," he said. "We need to grow faster and we need that kind of people."

The micro-inverter would convert the direct current electricity generated by solar panels to alternating current at the back of the panel itself rather than the typical approach of converting it at a central location, Van Dell said.

**He expects the Austin office to employ 20 workers within two years and maintain SmartSpark's Champaign, Ill., plant that employs 23 workers.**

Production of the micro-inverters, branded SolarBridge, are scheduled to begin within a year and manufacturing would be contracted out, said Van Dell, who initially moved to Austin to work for **Dell Inc.** (Nasdaq: DELL) the Round Rock-based computer maker.

The devices, which would be manufactured by a contractor, would be used on residential solar panels as well as panels used by small businesses, he said.

For the last four years Van Dell was the CEO of **Primarion Corp.**, a California-based developer of digital power integrated circuits. In April 2008, **Infineon Technologies AG** (NYSE: IFX) acquired Primarion for an undisclosed amount.

Van Dell said he commuted from Austin to California during his tenure at Primarion. And his familiarity with Austin's tech culture played a role in re-locating SmartSpark.

**"There might be other cities in the country with high tech workers," Van Dell said. "But I'm personally convinced that Austin would be at the top of that list."**

Before Primarion, Van Dell was CEO of Austin-based **Legerity Inc.**, chip design company formed in 2000 as a spinoff of Sunnyvale, Calif.-based **Advanced Micro Devices Inc.** (NYSE: AMD).

SmartSpark has operated from Illinois since its was founded in 2004 with technology licensed from the **University of Illinois** at Urbana-Champaign. It's garnered \$7.1 million in capital from seed investors as well as **Battery Ventures**, a Massachusetts-based venture capital firm.

Battery partner Jason Matlof, a SmartSpark board member, expects SmartSpark to begin generating revenue within 12 months. And Austin is the right location to commercialize a new product category such as that being developed by SmartSpark.

"It's a great fit for the company because of the city's history in power electronics," he said.

Susan Davenport, vice president of business retention and expansion for the Austin Chamber of Commerce, agreed.

**"Our region is recognized as a center of innovation for energy technologies," she said, "and the presence of a company like SmartSpark with the clean technology they are commercializing will be a great addition to our area."**

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**