

3

Eliminate red tape in zoning and permitting



Dennis Schroeder via National Renewable Energy Laboratory. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

FRIENDLY PERMITTING AND ZONING CAN CLEAR THE WAY FOR SOLAR GROWTH

Homeowners and businesses interested in installing solar projects often have to jump through too many hoops, from zoning revision applications to cumbersome permitting processes. That kind of red tape can act as an obstacle, making it too difficult, time-consuming and expensive for many to make the transition to solar energy.

While permitting and zoning laws include important protections for public safety, cities should make sure they do not unnecessarily slow or restrict solar energy development. Cities can eliminate barriers to going solar by expediting permitting processes, reducing fees and making zoning policies clear and non-prohibitive for solar projects. Reducing the soft costs associated with new solar projects, or the non-hardware costs from permit applications and other fees, provides a number of benefits:

- More efficient approval processes can save local governments time and money.
- Soft costs can make up to two-thirds of the cost of installing a home solar project, and inefficient permitting processes can add up to \$2,500 to the pricetag. A streamlined process can save customers money and make solar energy an affordable option for more residents and businesses.
- Improving local processes for going solar can grow the local solar economy. More than one-third of solar installers say they avoid working in communities where permitting

is difficult, so you can attract more solar businesses with a friendly regulatory environment.

- Easy and approachable process requirements, in which necessary steps and fees are transparent and readily available, make it more likely that residents and businesses considering solar will move forward so that your community can reach its energy goals faster.

KEY FEATURES OF STRONG SOLAR PROCESSES

To encourage more solar deployment in your city, make your permitting process as affordable, fast and user-friendly as possible. Working with local installers can help ensure that the process you design works efficiently. Be sure to include the following key features for a process that fits that bill:

- Provide a one-stop shop for solar permits, including an online checklist with all the necessary steps, a link to the appropriate application and an explanation of the approval process, on your city website.
- Use a standard application form for permits based on best practices.
- Require a single permit application for a typical residential rooftop installation.
- Keep fees minimal, reasonable and based on cost incurred by the city. They should not act as a source of revenue.
- Turn around applications as quickly as possible.

Your community's zoning policies should also support solar development. As you review and revise zoning requirements, start by identifying current limitations on solar development.

Stakeholders, local experts and community partners can all provide helpful perspectives as you draft replacement language. Using the following best practices will ensure that your new code supports local solar growth:

- Implement a solar access ordinance to guard home and business owners' right to generate electricity from the sunlight that hits their property, regardless of the actions of neighbors or homeowners' associations, as a *by-right accessory use in all zones*.
- Avoid any language that limits solar based on visibility to the public or glare, that unreasonably restricts system size, that requires subjective reviews based on appearance or that mandates consent from neighbors. These restrictions unnecessarily prohibit many rooftop solar projects.
- Establish a clear regulatory pathway for primary use of solar systems, such as through a special use permit or through inclusion among allowed conditional uses.
- For historic properties and other special cases, provide clear guidance for the installation of solar.
- Post an online resource that provides an overview of what types and sizes of solar arrays are permitted in which zones, the processes required for approval and any other relevant information in your community's zoning code.

SOLSMART CAN HELP COMMUNITIES ACHIEVE BEST PRACTICES

[SolSmart](#) is a national designation program funded through the Department of Energy. Through the program, communities can receive no-cost technical assistance from solar experts to help them implement best practices in permitting, zoning and other solar processes. Communities can earn designation at the Bronze, Silver or Gold level by taking actions to make it faster, easier and more affordable for residents and businesses to go solar.



Olivier Le Querrec via Shutterstock

Rooftop solar installations

CASE STUDIES

Over 230 communities have been awarded SolSmart designation, and many others have enacted solar-friendly permitting and zoning policies outside of the SolSmart program. Two examples are included below, and many more can be found in the additional resources provided.

- **The City of West Palm Beach, Florida**, provides an expedited permitting process and [one-stop shop](#) webpage for residents and businesses interested in installing solar. The website includes information on financing options and incentives, solar co-ops and everything you need to apply for a permit. The city also made their process fully transparent, and residents can check the status of their application online throughout the review process. For these and other zoning revisions, the city has been designated a SolSmart Gold community.
- **The City of Boulder**, another SolSmart Gold community, provides a [guide to zoning, permitting and connecting](#) to the grid for both traditional solar energy systems and solar energy installations that include on-site storage. Making the regulatory process for storage easy and transparent will encourage more deployment as the technology becomes widely available.

RESOURCES

- You can learn more about the [SolSmart program](#), see the [full criteria](#) for designation and [request a consultation online](#).
- The [Solar America Board for Codes and Standards](#), or Solar ABCs, provides recommended codes and standards for solar, including a standard permit application.
- The Interstate Renewable Energy Council (IREC) and Vote Solar have identified nine [Residential Solar Permitting Best Practices](#), and additional case studies are included in this [explainer](#).
- Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission provides [a framework and model ordinance](#) for solar energy in zoning codes.