

QUICKNOTES

Planning for Solar Energy

There is a growing desire among communities to become more sustainable. Energy conservation and renewable energy production (including solar energy) play a significant role in community sustainability goals. Public officials and engaged citizens have many opportunities throughout the planning process to help support and advance solar energy initiatives in their communities.

LONG-RANGE COMMUNITY VISIONING AND GOAL SETTING

Community visioning is often the first step in developing any type of community plan, for establishing new standards, policies, and incentives, for doing development work, and for making public investment decisions. Whether part of a planning process or on its own, visioning is an important first chance to identify new opportunities and priorities—including those related to solar energy. Planners often conduct visioning exercises that produce a community's long-term goals and objectives. By expressing their views of renewable energy generation during these visioning exercises (including responding to surveys and participating in visioning meetings), citizens enable planners to gauge the level of awareness and importance of solar energy in the community. Planners use this information to develop policies and action items for the community. Once a community agrees upon its long-range goals and objectives, municipal officials should look to them when reviewing development proposals, making budget decisions, and performing other related tasks. Both citizens and public officials should use these visioning meetings to discuss how solar energy is connected to other community goals and values and how solar energy could help achieve other community goals.

PLAN MAKING

Solar energy initiatives can be integrated into new plans undertaken by a community or through amendments to existing community plans. When citizens identify solar energy as a priority during visioning and goal-setting exercises, they are influencing the types of plans a community undertakes as well as what components may be incorporated into existing plans in the future. Energy-related initiatives can be included in a variety of plan types including comprehensive plans, subarea plans, and functional plans, such as climate action plans, energy plans, or sustainability plans.

Community members can provide input in terms of where in the plan document energy-related information is discussed and the types of information included in the plan. Typical places to incorporate solar energy in a plan include during a background or existing conditions assessment, where local information is used to establish a baseline energy assessment that can be used by public officials to evaluate the success of the community in achieving its goals. Plans should also document existing solar resources in the community and discuss how energy use relates to other community issues and plan elements.

Plans also typically establish goals and policies and lay out action steps for meeting those goals. These goals, policies, and action steps guide decision makers when making future decisions and may address topics like solar access protection, incentives, or preferential locations for new solar energy systems.

STANDARDS, POLICIES, INCENTIVES

Planners write and amend standards, policies, and incentives that have an important influence on what, where, and how things get built and what, where, and how land and buildings are preserved. Certain segments of the general public, including developers, property owners, and owners of historic properties or properties in historic districts may be particularly interested in solar standards, policies, and incentives. Additionally, review boards with discretionary power rely on this information when making decisions about solar installations on a given property.



A PV System installed on a residence. (Photo credit:
Courtesy of DOE/NREL)



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Making Great Communities Happen

Communities should identify and remove unintended barriers, create incentives, and enact appropriate standards in their zoning codes, subdivision codes, and other regulations and ordinances to promote solar energy. Barriers may include height restrictions or private covenants. Communities can create incentives by streamlining the approval process, reducing permitting costs, and increasing flexibility on other standards in exchange for the incorporation of solar installations. Finally, communities can enact solar standards. These include clarifying the types of solar systems allowed and where they are permitted, mitigating potential nuisances associated with solar equipment, and defining and protecting solar access. Communities may also consider requiring solar orientation for new development or requiring solar-ready development.

Model ordinances exist to help communities get started. Examples are provided in the *Planning and Zoning for Solar Energy* Essential Information Packet available through APA's Planning Advisory Service. When developing solar and solar-friendly ordinances, communities should be sure to tailor regulations to their community.

DEVELOPMENT WORK

During public review processes, hearings, and comment periods, citizens may have an opportunity to provide input on development or redevelopment projects, which provides a chance to advocate for solar. They can encourage planners to discuss solar options with developers who submit development proposals at the early stages of the review process. They can also encourage public officials to approve solar-friendly standards in their codes and ordinances to make solar more viable in future development. In instances where projects trigger a conditional or special permit use approval by a board, citizens can attend public meetings and advocate for project design that maximizes solar potential or inclusion of solar installations on design plans.

Local governments are also often involved in a variety of public-private partnerships and redevelopment projects including mixed use developments, brownfields development, downtown revitalization, affordable housing, transit-oriented developments, transportation projects, and public facilities including schools—all of which have the potential to integrate solar resources.

PUBLIC INVESTMENTS

Towns, cities, and counties undertake major investments in infrastructure and community facilities that support private development and quality of life in their communities. Public buildings and structures such as town and city halls, parking meters, roads, libraries, schools, parking garages, public works buildings, and police and fire stations all have solar potential. Installation of solar systems at these locations can help meet community energy reduction goals as well as substantially reduce energy costs and energy cost uncertainty for the community over the long term. Increasing renewable energy efforts also has positive impacts on the local economy, including the creation of green jobs.

Public officials can help facilitate this by approving the allocation of funding for the construction of solar installations on public facilities. Citizens can voice their support for these projects during public meetings or through calls, letters, or e-mails to their mayor, council members, or planning department.

CONCLUSION

Knowing where in the planning process the opportunity exists to advance solar energy initiatives and how to do it successfully will help communities position themselves to maximize their solar potential. By actively considering solar energy during visioning, plan making, creation of the regulatory framework, development review, and decision making related to public investments, citizens and public officials can help ensure the expanded presence of solar in their communities.

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