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Expedited Solar Photovoltaic (PV) Permitting: Initial Recommendations for the City of Arvin

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The primary objective of this write-up is to provide the City of Arvin staff with background information and initial recommendations for developing an expedited solar photovoltaic (PV) permitting process, based on primary and secondary research conducted on the City of San Francisco's streamlined permitting model. This write-up is *not* intended to provide Arvin with permitting language, criteria and standards, as we feel that these components should be developed and vetted internally, with local city and solar industry stakeholders.

Recommendation #1: Develop an expedited solar PV permitting process based on the best practices of other local governments.

Instead of reinventing the wheel, looking to successful solar permitting models adopted by area local governments is an efficient way for any municipality to establish and implement new programs and policies. Developing an expedited solar PV permitting process is no exception to this notion, and so we advise that Arvin staff assess other local governments' procedures and tailor these to the City of Arvin's particular city staffing and related needs. To this point, the City of San Francisco has one of the most streamlined and efficient expedited solar PV permitting programs in California, from which Arvin could greatly leverage. (*NOTE: Details on San Francisco's solar permitting procedures are included in "Additional Information" section at the end of the document.*)

Recommendation #2: Involve all relevant stakeholders in the development process.

In speaking with the Chief Building Inspector for the City of San Francisco, we learned that one of the most important elements in developing an expedited solar PV permitting process is to involve stakeholders who will be affected and who have extensive experience within the industry. These stakeholders include the local utilities, the Fire Department, Building Department, Planning Department, and local solar contractors/installers. Engaging these stakeholders is key for several reasons. These players will be the ones who will be most affected by the new permitting process. Therefore, it is absolutely essential to get their "buy-in" and to ensure that they are all on the "same page" and committed, in order to ensure that the project is a success. Additionally, as members of the solar industry, they know what works and what will not. Based on the experiences of these stakeholders, they will have the in-depth knowledge to provide the right feedback to help create and refine the solar PV permitting procedures.

Recommendation #3: Establish interim procedures to pilot new/modified procedures.

During the development process, it is important to keep in mind that it is not necessary to “get it done” on the first try. In fact, a successful development process should entail multiple phases where the new/modified procedures can be tested and subsequently assessed (e.g.: determine what works, what needs to be improved, what needs to be tailored based on the unique circumstances of community.) Scheduling annual/bi-annual stakeholder meetings is highly recommended to fine-tune the solar PV permitting procedures. As such, developing any new procedure takes time. San Francisco, for instance, initiated the development of their expedited solar PV permitting process three to four years before getting to the point where they are ready to adopt a fully vetted permitting model. The procedures have been reviewed, modified, and refined three times over the course of several years. San Francisco is now at a point where they can soon issue a finalized procedure.

Recommendation #4: Train your staff.

In order to implement an efficient expedited solar PV permitting process, local governments must have informed staff who are skilled in the requirements and process under the program. For smaller cities with limited staff, we strongly recommend holding special training sessions (at least annually) for city staff involved in the solar PV system review and permitting, in order to keep them updated on any new technology developments and modified procedures. Having in-house training sessions is ideal since they will be specifically tailored to the community’s unique circumstances. It’s important to provide standardized training of every aspect of the permitting process (from permit processing to site inspections) to all city staff involved in the process, in order to ensure consistency and quality control across all aspect of the permitting procedure.

Additional Information

1. San Francisco’s solar PV permitting process summary:

San Francisco’s permitting process was streamlined and costs for complex projects were reduced and fast-tracked. The prior solar permitting process had been limited in scope and contained complexities, which made it expensive and time consuming for installers. The Task Force worked with the Department of Building Inspections, Planning Department, Fire Department, local solar installers and other interested parties to identify what could be done to reduce permitting time and cost without compromising safety. The resulting revised permitting guidelines allow for more flexibility at a lower cost as installers are required to obtain electrical permits only; no building permits or building permit fees are required. These revisions plus the elimination of the Planning Department from the standard permitting process has resulted in nearly all electrical photovoltaic applications being issued over-the-counter instead of in a matter of weeks. At a total cost of \$111.25 for most systems, these permits are among the least expensive in California.¹

- *San Francisco Solar Photovoltaic Permitting Procedures*
<http://www.sfgov.org/site/uploadedfiles/dbi/Services/PermitServices/SolarPermitProcess.pdf>
- *Electrical Permit Application for Roof-Mounted Solar Photovoltaic (PV) Systems Only:*

¹ Source: http://sfgov.org/site/uploadedfiles/assessor/press_release/SolarTF_Summary_Recommendations.pdf

<http://www.sfgov.org/site/uploadedfiles/dbi/Services/InspectionServices/Solar%20Permit%20Worksheet.pdf>

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