California Solar Permitting Guidebook

Improving Permit Review and Approval for Small Solar Systems

Developed by:
Solar Permitting Task Force
Governor’s Office of Planning and Research
Office of Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr.

Spring 2015
Second Edition (Updated)
California Solar Permitting Guidebook
Improving Permit Review and Approval for Small Solar Systems

Governor’s Office of Planning and Research
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE ................................................................................................................................. 4
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................................................................ 5
PURPOSE AND USE OF THIS GUIDE .................................................................................... 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>CURRENT LAWS, REGULATIONS AND CODES</th>
<th>................................................................. 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State Code Requirements ..................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limits on Local Modifications ..........</td>
<td>........................................................................ 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Permit Fees ....................................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>THE PROJECT APPROVAL PROCESS</th>
<th>........................................................................ 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Permit Application and Plan Review</td>
<td>........................................................................ 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Site Inspection ..........................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local Utility Approval (Solar PV systems only)</td>
<td>........................................................................ 16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXPEDITED PERMITTING FOR SMALL PV SYSTEMS</th>
<th>........................................................................ 18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PV Toolkit for Local Governments ..............................................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1) Submittal Requirements Bulletin — Solar Photovoltaic Installations 10 kW or Less</td>
<td>........................................................................ 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Eligibility Checklist for Expedited Solar Photovoltaic Permitting</td>
<td>........................................................................ 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Solar PV Standard Plan — Simplified Central/String Inverter Systems</td>
<td>........................................................................ 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) Solar PV Standard Plan — Simplified Microinverter and ACM Systems</td>
<td>........................................................................ 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5) Structural Criteria for Residential Rooftop Solar Energy Installations</td>
<td>........................................................................ 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6) MOU Regarding Solar Photovoltaic Plan Review and Inspection Services</td>
<td>........................................................................ 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7) Inspection Guide for PV Systems ................................................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXPEDITED SOLAR WATER HEATING INSTALLATIONS</th>
<th>........................................................................ 65</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SWH Toolkit for Local Governments ..............................................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1A) Submittal Requirements Bulletin — Solar Domestic Water Heating Installations 30 kWth or Less</td>
<td>........................................................................ 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1B) Submittal Requirements Bulletin — Solar Pool Heating Installations 30 kWth or Less</td>
<td>........................................................................ 71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2A) Eligibility Checklist for Expedited Solar Domestic Water Heating Permitting</td>
<td>........................................................................ 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2B) Eligibility Checklist for Expedited Solar Pool Heating Permitting</td>
<td>........................................................................ 74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3A) Solar Domestic Water Heating Standard Plan .................................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3B) Solar Pool Heating Standard Plan ................................................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) Structural Criteria for Residential Rooftop Solar Energy Installations</td>
<td>........................................................................ 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5A) Inspection Guide for SDWH Systems ..............................................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5B) Inspection Guide for Solar Pool Heating Systems ..........................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>RESOURCES AND INFORMATION</th>
<th>........................................................................ 93</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding the Code .................................................................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Code Requirements for Solar Photovoltaic (PV) Systems ..................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Code Requirements for PV on Buildings other than One- and Two-Family Dwellings</td>
<td>........................................................................ 98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Code Requirements for Solar Water Heating (SWH) Systems ...............</td>
<td>........................................................................ 106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Glossary .........................................................................................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Additional Resources ....................................................................</td>
<td>........................................................................ 111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

California is a world leader in renewable energy generation. Solar and wind power, as well as emerging technologies such as biomass and fuel cells, are transforming California. Renewable energy is helping to power the state’s economy, reducing our state’s reliance on imported energy sources and decreasing air pollution.

California’s state and local governments have set aggressive goals to expand renewable energy. In 2011, California adopted a Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS) requiring that at least one-third of the state’s electricity come from clean energy sources by 2020. Many local governments also have their own targets for renewable energy. Additionally, Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr. has set a specific goal of developing 12,000 megawatts of small-scale, localized renewable electrical power (often called “distributed generation”) in California by 2020.

Small-scale renewable energy benefits California communities. It increases energy reliability for residents and businesses by generating electricity near where it is consumed. This type of energy can also provide stable electricity prices for consumers and creates thousands of jobs across California.

In order to expand small-scale renewable energy across California, Governor Brown instructed the Governor’s Office of Planning and Research (OPR) to help remove barriers to its development. One such barrier is the patchwork of permitting requirements for small solar installations throughout the state. Solar energy systems have been installed in California for decades, and their technology, as well as the methods to install and maintain them, is well established. As a result, permitting for these small and simple solar projects should be as simple and standardized as possible.

The first California Solar Guidebook was published in 2012, the result of a collective effort of stakeholders from local government, the building industry, professional associations, solar companies, utility providers and state regulatory agencies. Many local permitting agencies adopted practices and standard documents outlined in the Guidebook. These practices made installing solar less expensive and increased expansion of this technology in California.

Despite these improvements, however, costs to permit solar are still higher than necessary. Increased solar adoption has inundated many jurisdictions with permit applications and inspection requests. Solar technologies have changed, new laws have been passed and codes have been revised. This second edition of the Guidebook addresses those changes, improves upon the recommended process for expedited permitting of solar PV systems, and adds information about solar water heating systems.
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