

Ten Ways Your City Can Go Solar



Solar power is on the rise across America – increasing 350-fold since 2002.

Major cities are helping to lead this clean energy revolution. Our new report, *Shining Cities: Harnessing the Benefits of Solar Energy in America*, shows that cities from every region of the U.S. are driving solar development with strong public policies – reaping important benefits for the environment, public health and the economy. Investing in local solar power installations can help cities and their residents keep more of their energy dollars at home, creating good local jobs.

Here are some tips for how your city can follow suit:

1 Set a goal and commit to it

Ambitious goals for solar power provide a rallying point for the public and elected officials. In 2013, Cincinnati officials adopted a goal of putting solar panels on 20 percent of the city's roofs within 15 years. Cities can designate a point person and/or an advisory committee to bring people together around the goals. The city of New York has appointed a solar team that works to bring more solar power online in the city.

2 Let government lead by example

Cities can set an example and boost the local solar market by installing solar power on the rooftops of public buildings and engaging in high-profile demonstration projects. The city of New Bedford, Massachusetts, has reduced electricity spending by installing solar power on city buildings and public spaces, including installations on three schools, a public gym and the Department of Public Infrastructure Building.

3 Develop and publicize local financing options

Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) financing programs allow property owners to borrow money from a specially created fund, repaying the loan over time through their property taxes. As of March 2014, Wayne County, which includes the city of Detroit, was the largest local government outside of California to create a PACE district to provide financing for commercial properties.

Cities can also partner with local financial institutions to offer competitive

Above: solar panels on a housing development in Denver, Colorado.

Photo: Namaste Solar Electric and Vantage Point Imagery

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A community solar project atop the Seattle City Aquarium.

loans for solar power. The “Milwaukee Shines” program, for example, partnered with Summit Credit Union to offer low-interest loans of up to \$20,000 for eligible solar PV installations.

4 Reduce unnecessary red tape and fees

Going solar should be easy and hassle free. Permitting, installation and interconnection fees make up a significant part of the cost of a solar project, and cities can remove or reduce these fees to make solar power more accessible to residents and businesses. In Philadelphia, solar permitting fees are reduced to include only the cost of labor, not equipment. Chicago’s “Solar Express Permit Program” allows solar PV projects to receive same-day permit approvals, with fees reduced by 25 percent. The city of San Francisco has taken steps to reduce wait times for solar PV applications and has created online permitting tools. The The Long Island Unified Solar Permit Initiative is at work in Suffolk and Nassau counties in New York to standardize regulations across communities and reduce wait times for solar permits.

5 Encourage community solar projects

Community solar programs allow customers to support and benefit from solar power projects in their communities, even if the solar panels are not connected to their own electric meters. Cities can work

with their utilities to offer this alternative for homeowners or renters who cannot site solar panels on their residences.

Seattle City Light, for example, allows its customers to invest in community solar projects. The program recently funded an installation on the Seattle Aquarium.

6 Give solar power a tax break

Cities can offer tax breaks for solar power. New York City offers a property tax credit for homeowners who install solar panels and exempts residential solar panels from the local sales tax. Cleveland and Cincinnati offer property tax abatements for buildings that are certified as “green,” including many that incorporate solar energy.

7 “Solarize” your city

Bulk purchasing and public education programs can help residents of city neighborhoods “go solar” together. “Solarize” programs connect solar installers to many customers at a time and reduce costs for solar installers and consumers. Portland, Oregon, was the first to offer this program, and other city and state programs – like Solarize Boston, Solarize Charlotte, Sol-

arize Asheville, and Solarize Connecticut – have followed suit.

8 Get local utilities involved

Cities should encourage the electric utilities serving their areas – whether municipal or investor-owned – to partner with them in unlocking the potential of solar energy. In New York City, the investor-owned utility Con Edison worked with the city and the state to launch the “100 Days of Solar” initiative to streamline the process of issuing solar permits, interconnecting customers to the grid, and issuing rebates.

9 Guarantee “solar rights”

Local governments should adopt “solar rights policies,” which protect access to solar power by overriding local ordinances or homeowners’ association policies that bar residents from installing solar power equipment on their properties. Cities such as Sacramento have passed laws to allow solar installations to exceed height restrictions stated in the city zoning code.

Some cities have added building code provisions that require homes to be “solar ready,” or able to accept solar panels without additional wiring or major building changes, thereby further facilitating homeowners’ access to solar power.

10 Push for strong state and federal leadership

Pro-solar state and federal policies are critical for the development of solar energy, and cities should use their influence to advocate for stronger state and federal financial incentives for solar energy, solar “carve-outs” in renewable electricity standards, strong net metering and interconnection standards, and comprehensive solar rights policies.

Sources available upon request.

For more information about Environment America Research & Policy Center, for additional copies of this factsheet, or for copies of the report *Shining Cities: Harnessing the Benefits of Solar Energy in America* please visit www.environmentamericacenter.org.

