

Simplifying the Solar Permitting Process

The Importance of Consistency

Many municipalities and other authorities having jurisdiction (AHJs) are facing dramatic increases in rooftop solar permit applications. With this trend expected to continue and spread, streamlining building and electrical permitting processes will become increasingly important to more AHJs. To facilitate such streamlining, IREC and Vote Solar have identified nine [Best Practices in Residential Solar Permitting](#), which should result in benefits to both AHJs and solar installers.

Underlying these best practices is the goal of increased consistency of solar permitting processes across jurisdictions. When technical and procedural requirements are relatively consistent—regionally, statewide, or even nationally—it can offer significant efficiency benefits for both AHJs and the solar industry.

Why Is Consistency Important?

Like many other contractors, solar installers typically work in more than one jurisdiction. Their businesses may be countywide or statewide, or even span multiple states. On the other hand, control over the permitting process is typically a local function. AHJs have varying degrees of discretion over what the process looks like, but they are almost always the entities responsible for solar permitting. As a result, solar installers can often face different permitting requirements jurisdiction by jurisdiction. When permitting requirements vary in this way, understanding and complying with them can be time-intensive and costly for solar installers. It can also mean that installers make more mistakes in the process—for example, providing inadequate information on their applications—which in turn can be time-intensive and costly for AHJ staff, as well.

When requirements are consistent, installers become familiar with them and learn efficient ways to comply with them. Installers benefit because they spend less time learning the particularities of each jurisdiction's requirements and can instead focus on designing safe and effective systems that can be installed at a low cost. AHJs benefit because the overall quality of the applications and the installations increases. As a result, AHJ staff has to spend less time educating installers and ensuring compliance with relevant standards. Adoption of a consistent set of requirements also allows AHJs to take advantage of other jurisdictions' knowledge and experience, rather than developing new standards.



- **In the end, the core goal of any permitting process is to allow the AHJ to ensure public health and safety, as well as compliance with any design standards. Streamlining permitting processes in a consistent way does not change these goals. Instead, it helps to meet them in a more efficient manner for both AHJs and solar installers, as well as other contractors that obtain permits through the same processes.**



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How can consistency be achieved?

Adoption of Model Forms and Guidelines

- IREC and other organizations provide model forms and processes, which AHJs can adopt and modify as needed
- to fit their local contexts. Many AHJs are already familiar with the Solar America Board for Codes and Standards (Solar ABCs) [Expedited Permit Process for PV Systems](#), which addresses permitting typical small rooftop solar
- installations. Solar ABCs offers both a model permitting process, which allows AHJs to process these sorts of
- installations quickly and efficiently, as well as associated model forms, including a model application form. Simi-
- larly, IREC has developed a model checklist for solar permit inspections (forthcoming Sept. 2013), as well as
- model [Field Inspection Guidelines for PV Systems](#). By adopting such models, AHJs can take a significant first
- step toward making their permitting processes and forms consistent regionally, statewide and even nationally.

Regional Collaboration with Other AHJs

To ensure consistency in their region, AHJs may voluntarily collaborate to standardize their permitting processes. This may entail coordinated adoption of model forms and processes, as discussed above, or development of specific requirements that match the region's particular needs. Such a regional approach allows AHJs to take into account their region's particular housing stock, as well as the types of solar installations and solar installers operating in their regions. A number of regional collaborations have already achieved significant permitting reform including the [Long Island Unified Solar Permitting and the New York State Unified Solar Permit Initiatives in New York](#), and the [East Bay Green Corridor Initiative](#) in California. In addition, there has been successful permitting reform at the county level, including in Pima County, Arizona, and Sonoma County, California.

Conformance with Statewide Legislation and Guidance

States usually have the ability to influence or control the local process to some degree. For example, states like California, Colorado and Arizona have implemented statewide solar permit fee statutes, which dictate how AHJs may calculate permit fees and set fee caps. In addition, statewide permitting guidance can provide AHJs with useful resources related to streamlining the permitting process, including documents clarifying solar permitting best practices, or providing model application forms, checklists or other documents. For example, along with various other resources, the California Governor's Office of Planning and Research provides a [Solar Permitting Guidebook](#), which clarifies requirements for solar installations and offers a toolkit of model documents.

For more information on how to encourage permitting process consistency in your region, visit www.projectpermit.org or www.irecusa.org/regulatory-reform/permitting, or contact:

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