Solar Ready II

CASE STUDY

Photo: Solar Ready II team
Solar Ready II (SRII) is a partnership of the National Association of Regional Councils (NARC), Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) and Meister Consultants Group (MCG). It is supported by the U.S. Department of Energy SunShot Initiative Rooftop Solar Challenge II (RSCII) grant. The goal of RSCII is “to deploy, at the regional and national scale innovative, local government-level solutions towards eliminating market barriers and lowering the non-hardware balance of system costs (‘soft costs’) of grid-tied solar photovoltaics (PV).”

Launched in October 2013, SRII uses the broad impact and influence of regional planning councils (RPCs) to provide direct assistance to local governments, helping them implement strategies to measurably improve market conditions for solar. Ten RPCs were selected to participate in SRII. The catchment area of these councils represents well over 200 local governments, containing nearly 18.7 million people across thirteen states and the District of Columbia.

Resources and technical assistance provided to participating RPCs through SRII come at an important time. Energy policy has been identified as a leading priority for many regions across the country. Changes in federal and state policies, rising energy demand, price fluctuations, and shifts in the traditional mix of energy supplies are having the greatest impact at the regional level. As a result, many regions are interested in pursuing solar energy but are unsure where to start. For participating RPCs, SRII provides a valuable foundation for initiating the conversation and building support for solar development with their local governments and other stakeholders.

“Solar Ready II is an exemplary project showcasing regionalism, cooperation, and the power of local actions.”

Chuck Bean, Executive Director, Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCILS PARTICIPATING IN SRII</th>
<th>POPULATION OF ENGAGED JURISDICTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board</td>
<td>349,673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission</td>
<td>1,766,812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maricopa Association of Governments</td>
<td>2,010,960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments</td>
<td>4,721,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-America Regional Council</td>
<td>1,209,864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Central Texas Council of Governments</td>
<td>4,146,346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission</td>
<td>358,217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments</td>
<td>1,900,330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council</td>
<td>791,699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council</td>
<td>1,505,490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL POPULATION REPRESENTED IN SRII</strong></td>
<td><strong>18,761,241</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“We are seeing solar energy deployed across the U.S. at an unprecedented rate, and regional councils play an important role in accelerating this growth, particularly at the local level. Regional councils have long been a trusted voice in their communities and are able to gather local elected officials, solar industry representatives, utilities, planners, and other local government personnel in the same room, get them interested, and even excited about adopting solar best management practices.”

Joanna Turner, Executive Director, National Association of Regional Councils

The Best Management Practice (BMP) framework, discussed below, is a model, not only for RPCs but also for individual local governments that are looking for ways to support or advance regional adoption of solar technologies.

Background

SRII builds upon the success of Solar Ready KC, a 2011 RSC project. Led by MARC, Solar Ready KC brought together the regional council, a local utility, and five jurisdictional partners to develop a comprehensive guide to solar BMPs aimed at reducing soft costs and improving market conditions in the Kansas City region.³ The resulting guide provides a framework for municipalities to streamline solar planning and
permitting processes, explore financing options, and identify their own best practices. As Georgia Nesselrode, program director of Local Government Services at MARC, explains: “We wanted to bring what we had learned through Solar Ready KC to a national level. Solar Ready II is an extension of what we were able to accomplish in the Kansas City metro region.”

Benefits of a Regional Approach

SRII provides insight into the value of a regional approach to solar and the powerful roles that RPCs can play in reaching and supporting a large number of local governments.

An RPC “is a multi-service entity with state- and locally-defined boundaries that delivers a variety of federal, state, and local programs while carrying out its function as a planning organization, technical assistance provider, and ‘visionary’ to its member local governments.”4 Multiple cities, towns, and/or counties make up an RPC catchment area, making it an ideal avenue for the widespread distribution of educational and outreach tools.

The most important function of an RPC is to foster communication, coordination, and collaboration among and across their member jurisdictions in a politically neutral setting. And because RPCs are aware of the specific needs, challenges, or other special considerations of member jurisdictions, they are uniquely suited to provide customized tools or technical assistance. RPCs are natural conveners and bring a multiplier effect through their ability to reach large numbers of communities and build networks, thus expediting the distribution of resources. As Chad Laurent, senior consultant and general counsel at MCG, points out, “Regional planning councils know who the stakeholders are; they can connect the dots on the ground; and they are a trusted source of information, training and resources.”

“Through SRII, RPCs work closely with NARC, MARC, MCG, and peer councils to create comprehensive and functional plans for solar growth and development; engage financial and industry sectors; educate member jurisdictions on the misconceptions about solar energy in their region; and assess the economic, social, and political impacts related to solar energy development. The SRII grant funding has provided the participating RPCs with an unparalleled opportunity to engage their regions’ local governments in ongoing discussions about how to prepare for and capitalize on the economic opportunities of current and future solar investments.

Through SRII, RPCs work closely with NARC, MARC, MCG, and peer councils to create comprehensive and functional plans for solar growth and development; engage financial and industry sectors; educate member jurisdictions on the misconceptions about solar energy in their region; and assess the economic, social, and political impacts related to solar energy development. The SRII grant funding has provided the participating RPCs with an unparalleled opportunity to engage their regions’ local governments in ongoing discussions about how to prepare for and capitalize on the economic opportunities of current and future solar investments.

SRII Activities

Selection of the ten RPCs was based on a competitive application process managed by NARC. Criteria for participation were developed to ensure not only that selected councils were committed to advancing
solar technologies, but also that there existed favorable conditions for them to do so. Requirements included having conducted an assessment of regional market readiness (Solar Market Maturity Model [SM3]), established partnerships with local utilities and nonprofits, and making a commitment to a financial and in-kind match of resources.

The central element of SRII is the distribution and application of solar BMPs (see table in the sidebar on SRII BMPs). Originally developed through Solar Ready KC and updated by MCG for SRII, the BMPs are fifteen actions that have been successful in facilitating installations and building solar markets across the country. The practices are divided across three categories: planning improvements, process improvements, and financing.

Planning improvements relate to zoning and other typical community development functions. Process improvements refer to how a jurisdiction provides information

**SRII BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES (BMPS)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>BMP CATEGORIES</strong></th>
<th><strong>IMPLEMENTATION STEPS</strong></th>
<th><strong>ACTION ITEMS</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PLANNING IMPROVEMENTS</strong></td>
<td>Zoning code improvements</td>
<td>Address solar in the zoning code and/or adopt a solar ordinance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enable solar access</td>
<td>Adopt a solar access ordinance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building code improvement</td>
<td>Engage Homeowners Associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROCESS IMPROVEMENTS</strong></td>
<td>Streamline permits</td>
<td>Develop criteria for expedited process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Create a permit checklist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Provide a central information source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standardize permit fees</td>
<td>Fixed fees for residential permits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Calculator for commercial permits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-qualify plans and installers</td>
<td>Pre-qualify installers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-qualify electrical plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FINANCING</strong></td>
<td>Engage local lenders</td>
<td>Provide resources and host a workshop for lending institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enact a Solarize Campaign</td>
<td>Launch a Solarize Campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Partner with local lenders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
about permitting and the permitting process itself, as well as about fee amounts for installing solar. The financing BMPs encourage innovative ways to drive down the cost of solar by working with local lenders. Also contained within the BMP framework are resources to learn more and examples of communities that have successfully implemented each practice. By offering a clearinghouse of examples and information, SRII is providing the tools for local governments to develop consistent policies and streamline processes that will have lasting, positive impacts.

“Improvements in the permitting and planning process are one of the fastest and most effective means to facilitate solar installations, making the process clear and seamless, offering a centralized location for up-to-date information, standardizing permit fees, coordinating utility notification and establishing a process to pre-qualify plans and installers.”

Excerpt from Solar Ready KC White Paper, p. 5.

“Solar Ready is helping us break down perceived barriers and is helping to streamline the process of implementing these solutions so that everybody wins through reduced energy costs.”

Tyson Warner, Executive Director, Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission

To prioritize and select action items from the list of BMPs, each participating RPC worked with existing stakeholder groups made up of representatives from local governments, utilities, environmental organizations, and the community. These groups met quarterly to discuss outreach efforts, jurisdictional needs, and project objectives. BMPs were selected in accordance with the specific needs of the region and the feasibility of implementation (see “Appendix” for links to the BMPS selected by each RPC). And as it is often not possible for an RPC to deliver one-on-one technical assistance to each member jurisdiction, the groups also provided a peer network, serving as communication hubs to connect and communicate efforts across and among jurisdictions, ensuring that efforts truly have a regional impact.

Because, as has already been stated, participating RPCs represent ten geographically diverse regions, consisting of over 200 local jurisdictions with various needs, each council has customized an outreach approach to most effectively share information about SRII and the benefits of solar adoption with residents across its member jurisdictions. For example, The Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board and the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council, created the Solarize Syracuse and Solar Ready Florida websites, to share information on solar and solar installations with residents, while the North Central Texas Council of Governments and Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council produced the North Central Texas Solar Initiative video and Solar Ready Florida video to educate their community about SRII. All RPCs have held educational summits and/or technical workshops on topics ranging from expedited zoning and permitting processes to strategies for lenders and safety workshops for first responders. NARC and MCG have assisted the councils’ communications and outreach strategies by creating materials and/or templates that each council can customize to meet its needs.
Lessons Learned

As SRII shows, using the outreach capacity and technical expertise of RPCs to support local government initiatives can be greatly effective at creating regionally consistent policies that lead to favorable solar market conditions in these areas. The following strategies and recommendations are based on the experience of SRII and may be helpful for other RPCs—as well as local governments—in their efforts to advance solar technologies throughout a region:

1. Select BMPs that are priorities for the region, and work with participating jurisdictions to develop implementation plans. Preselecting BMPs, rather than asking each jurisdiction to select practices independently, ensures that the region is working cohesively toward the same goals and has the greatest chance of influencing regional market conditions.

2. Identify a point of contact (e.g., an elected official, a city staff member) at each participating local government. This person should act as a champion ensuring that implementation of BMPs is moving forward.

3. Make sure the RPC is aware of all state policies and regulations that may influence or present barriers to implementation of certain BMPs.

4. Engage all the various stakeholders within a jurisdiction. RPCs can help local governments plan training or educational workshops that bring together local utilities, trade groups, academic institutions, etc., so that all stakeholders can achieve the same level of understanding of solar energy and its potential for the region. RPCs are especially encouraged to engage local financial institutions (lenders, investors, etc.) early in the process to debunk solar myths, demonstrate the financial benefits of solar, and gain their support. The solar industry should also be engaged from the beginning to provide insight into specific policy or process barriers that the stakeholders encounter.

“A key theme heard from all of the OKI [Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments] focus group sessions was the need to educate all sectors [about] the opportunities and benefits of rooftop solar. The interactive solar map being developed and deployed by OKI will heighten awareness of our solar resource across the region, enabling property owners to explore cost-effective solar options.”

Daniel Young, Lead Systems Designer, Dovetail Solar and Wind and Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments Solar Ready II Stakeholder Group Member

“There are 4,000 Floridians employed in the solar industry, and the Sunshine State has the potential to add many more jobs in this sector. Through the Solar Ready Florida project, the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council and our local governments are working to make it easier for Tampa Bay residents and businesses to install rooftop solar PV systems. Increased adoption of solar PV promotes the growth of the solar industry within the region and leads to more jobs and more economic opportunities for the people of Tampa Bay.”

Manny Pumariega, Executive Director, Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council

“Through Solar Ready II, we have been able to tackle issues related to permitting, installation, [and] inspection, and we’re working with local lending institutions [to] make funding sources for solar more available for our homeowners.”

Rick Buss, Assistant City Manager, City of Surprise, Arizona


Photo courtesy of North Central Texas Council of Governments
5. Partner with existing stakeholders focused on renewable energy. Coordinating with these entities may increase access to new audiences and lend an added level of credibility to local solar initiatives.

“This project increases the awareness of the benefits of solar power; plus, it helps to promote common approaches and standards that local governments can use in the permitting process for solar installations. Long term, the results of this project will be evidenced through less demand on electricity-generating units, lower energy costs, and improved air quality.”

Mike Eastland, Executive Director, North Central Texas Council of Governments

“The CNY RPDB [Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board] Solar Ready II project is advancing the region’s sustainability goals by reducing barriers and costs for solar power. Over time, the project will significantly increase the deployment of solar power in Central New York, helping to meet the region’s goal of increasing renewable energy sources tenfold by the year 2030.”

Chris Carrick, Energy Manager, Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board

Contacts
Mia Colson, Grants Manager, National Association of Regional Councils (NARC); 202-986-1032, ext. 218; mia@NARC.org

Georgia Nesselrode, Program Director of Local Government Services, Mid-America Regional Council (MARC); 816-701-8207; gnessel@marc.org

Chad Laurent, Esq., Senior Consultant and General Counsel, Meister Consultants Group (MCG); 617-209-1986; chad.laurent@mc-group.com

Endnotes
1. Unless otherwise noted, all information in this case study was obtained through interviews with the individuals listed under “Contacts.”
6. A complete list of the BMPs selected by each RPC and the activities of each can be found at NARC, “Solar Ready Regions,” http://narc.org/solarready/.
7. Populations based on 2010-2013 ACS Population Estimates as of November 2014

Appendix
Best Management Practice Activities of Regional Planning Councils Involved in Solar Ready II (SRII)
Detailed information on activities for each regional planning council involved in SRII can be found at:
Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board
http://narc.org/solarready/cnyrpdb/

Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission
http://narc.org/solarready/dvrpc/

Maricopa Association of Governments
http://narc.org/solarready/mag/

Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments
http://narc.org/solarready/mwcoeg/

Mid-America Regional Council
http://narc.org/solarready/marc/

North Central Texas Council of Governments
http://narc.org/solarready/nctcog/

Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission
http://narc.org/solarready/nirpc/

Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments
http://narc.org/solarready/oki/

Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council
http://narc.org/solarready/swfrpc/

Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council
http://narc.org/solarready/tbrpc/

Author
Tammy Zborel
SunShot Solar Outreach Partnership Case Studies are based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Energy under Award Number DE-EE0003526. The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) SunShot Initiative is a collaborative national effort to dramatically reduce the cost of solar energy before the end of the decade. The SunShot Solar Outreach Partnership (SolarOPs) is a U.S. DOE program providing outreach, training, and technical assistance to local governments to help them address key barriers to installing solar energy systems in their communities. The International City/County Management Association (ICMA), American Planning Association (APA), and National Association of Regional Councils (NARC), along with ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability and its partners, were competitively selected by the U.S. DOE to conduct outreach to local governments across the United States, enabling them to replicate successful solar practices and quickly expand local adoption of solar energy. For more information visit the SolarOPs website (solaroutreach.org) or contact Emily Dodson (edodson@icma.org).

Disclaimer: This report was prepared as an account of work sponsored by an agency of the United States Government. Neither the United States Government nor any agency thereof, nor any of their employees, makes any warranty, express or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information, apparatus, product, or process disclosed, or represents that its use would not infringe privately owned rights. Reference herein to any specific commercial product, process, or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise does not necessarily constitute or imply its endorsement, recommendation, or favoring by the United States Government or any agency thereof. The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the United States Government or any agency thereof.