

Ten Ways Your City Can Go Solar



Solar Power is on the Rise Across America.

The United States has enough solar energy installed to power the equivalent of millions of homes. America's major cities are playing a key role in this clean energy revolution. Our annual Shining Cities report shows that cities in every region of the country are driving the adoption of solar energy, but most have only begun to tap their solar energy potential. The cities that are setting the pace for solar growth are driving development through effective public policy, and they are seeing benefits for the environment, public health, grid resilience, and consumers.

Here are some tips for how your city can follow their lead:

LEAD THE WAY

1. Set ambitious goals for solar energy adoption: Goals provide an opportunity to institutionalize a shared vision of a solar-powered future. Some cities have established solar goals as a part of a broader commitment to 100 percent renewable energy, while others have stand-alone solar commitments. San Diego, which has one of the highest installed solar capacities in the country, aims to generate 100 percent of all electricity used within the city from renewable sources by 2035. Solar energy makes up a large part of the city's plan to achieve that goal. Such commitments that apply to the entire community drive the most progress in both distributed and utility-scale solar.

2. Lead by example with solar installations on public buildings: Cities can set an example, boost the local solar market and save on electricity bills by installing solar projects on public buildings. 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.

EXPAND ACCESS

3. Develop and publicize local financing options: The Property Assessed Clean Energy Program (PACE) allows local and state governments to loan money to home and business owners for energy improvements, which they repay over time through

Above: high school in Reno celebrates new solar array

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Solar panels atop homes in Tucson

property taxes. Cities can also partner with local financial institutions to offer competitive loans for solar projects. 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. Partnering with local solar installers to allow customers to lease panels over time can also help reduce up-front costs.

4. “Solarize” your city: Bulk purchasing programs allow businesses, homeowners and nonprofits to purchase solar energy collectively, thus lowering the cost for everyone involved. Portland, Oregon, was the first to offer a “Solarize” bulk purchasing program, and many other cities have followed suit. In less than five months, “Solarize Athens” more than tripled the residential solar energy capacity in the Athens, Georgia, metropolitan area.

5. Encourage community solar projects: Community solar programs allow customers to support and benefit from solar power projects in their communities. Customers can either own a share of a community solar project, or they can subscribe through a Power Purchase Agreement (PPA). Cities can work with their utilities to offer both alternatives. For example, through the Tallahassee Solar program, city residents and businesses signed up to purchase electricity from a community solar farm at a fixed rate.

REMOVE OBSTACLES

6. Eliminate red tape: Non-hardware costs like those associated with zoning and permitting now make up about two-thirds of the total price of residential solar systems. So, cities can eliminate barriers by reducing fees, making permitting rules clear and readily available, and expediting permitting processes. The Department of Energy’s SolSmart program can help cities reform their permitting processes. West Palm Beach and El Paso provide online applications with same-day approval; actions that helped both achieve SolSmart Gold designation.

7. Guarantee solar rights: Solar access ordinances guard homeowners’ right to generate electricity from sunlight that shines on their property, regardless of homeowners’ association policies. Local governments should also offer clear zoning regulations that allow solar energy installations on residential and commercial rooftops. The city of Bozeman, Montana, successfully changed its city code to remove barriers to installing rooftop solar. The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission

offers a model ordinance guide that cities can apply to their own local laws.

8. Be “solar ready:” Some local governments have adopted policies to require new homes and buildings to have solar power or to be designed so that it can be easily installed. The city of San Francisco requires that most new buildings be constructed with solar energy systems already installed. The city of Tucson requires that any new single-family homes or duplexes either include a solar energy system or be “solar ready,” meaning pre-outfitted so that future solar PV and hot water systems are easy to add.

BE AN ADVOCATE

9. Partner with utilities: 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. Con Edison, an investor-owned electric utility, worked with New York City and the State of New York to launch a “100 Days of Solar” initiative. While many investor-owned utilities have been willing partners with cities in promoting solar energy, cities served by less supportive utilities may wish to consider forming a municipal utility in order to gain greater control over their local electric grids.

10. Support strong state-level solar policies: State policies can have a large impact on a city’s ability to expand solar energy, so it is important that cities use their influence to advocate for stronger state financial incentives for solar energy, ambitious 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 annual *Shining Cities* reports, please visit:
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