

# Ten Ways Your Community Can Go Solar: A Toolkit for Cities and Towns



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## Texas's Cities & Towns can be Solar Leaders

Texas ranks [fourth in the nation](#) for installed solar capacity: almost 1% of the state's electricity comes from solar panels, and that amount can power over 360,000 homes. However, we are the largest state by area and the second largest state by population, and that population is growing quickly: we have [four of the top ten](#) fastest-growing counties in the nation. Our energy needs are increasing, and rooftop solar will be one of the cheapest, cleanest ways to meet demand. Solar prices have dropped over 70% in the last decade, and now local governments can set the pace for solar growth by driving development through effective public policy and community engagement. This will reap benefits for the environment, public health, grid resilience, and consumers.

These tips should serve as a toolkit for communities interested in leading the transition to clean, renewable energy. Each recommendation illustrates the importance of policy tools for advancing solar energy adoption.

### LEAD THE WAY

**1. Set ambitious goals for solar energy adoption:** A solar energy goal provides an opportunity to institutionalize a shared vision for a solar-powered future. Google's Project Sunroof estimates that, on average, 90% of roofs in Texas cities are solar-viable, and each of our cities/towns can set ambitious goals to drive growth. For example, Philadelphia has a goal of producing solar energy on 80 percent of suitable rooftop space by 2050. Such commitments that apply to the entire community result in the most progress in both distributed and utility-scale solar.

**2. Power public buildings with solar energy:** Cities can lead in the clean energy transition, boost the local solar market and save on electricity bills by powering their own operations with

solar energy. The City of Dallas powers 100% of its municipal operations with renewable energy, and the Houston (at 92%) has long been the nation's largest municipal purchaser of renewable power. The next step for Houston, along with other cities, counties, and other local organizations like MUDs, is to install solar panels on city transit buildings, police stations, affordable housing units, park buildings, community centers, and city halls.

### STREAMLINE SOLAR DEVELOPMENT

**3. Eliminate red tape:** Homeowners and businesses often have to jump through too many costly zoning and permitting hoops to go solar. Cities can eliminate barriers by expediting permitting processes, reducing fees and making zoning policies



*Rooftop solar installation in Del Valle, Texas*

clear and non prohibitive for solar projects. The Department of Energy's SolSmart program can help cities make it faster, easier, and more affordable to go solar.

**4. Adopt a requirement for new construction:** When it comes to reducing pollution and global warming emissions, any rooftop without solar is a missed opportunity. Houston and Lewisville have, since 2016, required that all new homes be built solar-ready, and Austin added the same requirement for commercial buildings in 2017. All Texas cities should adopt both commercial and residential solar-ready requirements; in the future, cities can even go a step further and lower costs by requiring that new buildings include solar energy systems.

## EXPAND ACCESS

**5. Develop and publicize local financing options:** Not everyone interested in going solar can pay for a new solar installation up front. Many cities and local governments in Texas have set up Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) programs, which allow commercial and industrial property owners to take out low-interest loans that are paid back on top of their property taxes. Cities can also partner with local financial institutions to offer low-interest loans for solar projects. Austin, for example, has partnered with Velocity Credit Union to offer 5-10 year loans of up to \$20,000 for residential solar installations. These programs, however, must be publicized so that people know about and take advantage of them.

**6. Participate in a solar co-op:** Bulk purchasing programs allow businesses, homeowners and nonprofits to purchase solar energy collectively, lowering the cost for everyone involved. Cities can partner with a local installer to offer bulk purchasing for a certain area, or some nonprofits like Solar United Neighbors run bulk purchasing programs ("co-ops") across Texas.

**7. Encourage community solar projects:** Community solar programs can give apartment occupants, and others unable to install their own solar systems, access to clean solar energy. Customers can rent or own a set of panels in a shared project and receive a credit on their utility bill for the power those panels produce. San Antonio, El Paso, And Austin, through their city utilities, have installed community solar projects on carports, parking garages, and public buildings. But this can work in deregulated areas too: Sunnyside Energy will soon build a large solar farm in Houston, part of which will provide community solar benefits to neighborhood residents.

## GO BEYOND CITY HALL

**8. Work with utilities or co-ops:** Cities should work with the electric utilities serving their areas as partners in unlocking the potential of solar energy. Austin Energy, for example, has created a plan to power the entire city with 100% renewable energy by 2030. Since much of Texas is deregulated, however, most cities (other than Austin, San Antonio, and El Paso) cannot determine the power make-up of their residents' electricity. There are other ways to encourage green energy growth: rural electric cooperatives can go 100% renewable, and local governments could partner with Centerpoint and Oncor to offer solar rebates or encourage local retail electric providers (REPs) to offer net metering for solar homeowners.

**9. Make room for solar jobs:** As more people and industries are choosing to install solar on their rooftops, the number of solar installers has increased rapidly. These companies tend to offer jobs that pay well, that keep workers safe from chemical fires or other pollutants, and that energize local economies. Implementing or encouraging solar installation job training programs and implementing policies friendly to small businesses could help the solar industry grow!

**10. Support strong state-level solar policies:** Cities can shine brighter when their state's energy policy landscape supports renewable energy development. Mayors, county judges, and other local government representatives should advocate for state policies that facilitate the widespread adoption of solar energy for homes, businesses and utilities.



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