

## Too many cities are overcharging for solar energy installations

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A survey of 49 cities in the Bay Area by the local chapter of the Sierra Club revealed vast disparities in permit costs for commercial solar systems. Many are obviously too high.

The results already have shamed some cities into reducing fees; others should take a hard look at how they came up with their numbers and lower them if they can. That's what happened four years ago with residential fees after a similar Loma Prieta Sierra Club survey. The average fee for a home is now about a third of what it was then.

In Cupertino, the worst offender, officials will ask the city council this week to revise fees. The city charges \$11,737 to install a 49-kilowatt unit, a mid-size solar system with about 250 panels, on a commercial building. The average charge in three Bay Area counties — Santa Clara, Alameda and San Mateo — was \$2,062. Even that, the Sierra Club estimates, is twice what it should cost for a five-hour review of plans and a property inspection.

Even solar-friendly San Jose, which has an over-the-counter review and a next-day inspection for most applications — the epitome of efficiency — needs to review its fees. Charging between \$2,350 and \$2,750 would appear to significantly overcharge small commercial installations, such as putting a few collectors on an office, while undercharging for a \$1 million installation on a large warehouse or manufacturer. Director of Planning Joe Horwedel said the department will study the charges.

If the Bay Area wants to be seen as a leader in energy technology, the least it can do is encourage solar installations in its own backyard.