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High Permit Fees, Long Waits Hinder Solar Power In SoCal Municipalities

Installing rooftop solar panels is becoming more affordable for homeowners in Southern California, especially for those who live in towns with low permit fees. But while the material costs for solar panels are dropping, some towns charge over \$1,500 just for a permit that costs under \$325 elsewhere. Although some towns issue permits over-the-counter, others take as long as seven weeks.

In early 2009, several chapters of the Sierra Club collaborated to survey the solar electric permit fees and processing times for 250 municipalities in Southern California, covering 10 counties: Imperial, Kern, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Ventura. The survey's goal is to reduce permitting barriers and to measure and publicize the degree to which residential solar panels, an energy solution with national and even global consequences, is subject to support or deterrence by local governments. In June 2009 the Sierra Club emailed city officials in all the surveyed jurisdictions to notify them of the survey's findings. In addition, emails were sent to all municipalities with solar permit fees over \$750, requesting that fees be reviewed and minimized to conform with the California Solar Rights Act (a state law with the declared intent that local permit fees for solar energy systems be minimized).

The survey found that for typical (3 kW) photovoltaic (PV) rooftop installations, permit fees range from zero in 21 jurisdictions to over \$700 in 70 jurisdictions. While the most solar-friendly towns recover their permitting costs with a fee of \$324 or less, the average for the survey area is \$493. And while 41 municipalities in Southern California can process solar permits immediately over-the-counter, 34 others consistently take over two weeks.

By comparison, a similar survey of 131 municipalities in Northern California found the average fee for that area is only \$214. In addition, 77 Northern California cities have significantly reduced their PV permit fees over the past few years. Northern California's success in reducing solar permit fees followed a Northern California Sierra Club report and campaign commenced in 2005. The efforts of many Northern California civic leaders to reduce local solar permit fees also spotlighted this issue. Now it's Southern California's turn to reduce PV permit fees and processing times! A newly published Sierra Club report (web link below) has recommendations to assist with this effort.

"Many municipalities have shown they can recover their costs for processing a residential solar permit with a fee of about \$324," said Jim Stewart, co-chair of the Sierra Club Angeles Chapter Global Warming and Energy Committee. "They've also demonstrated they can immediately approve the permits for standard installations over-the-counter. When other towns fall short of these recommended practices, it may be because they base permit costs on the total value of the system rather than actual costs of processing the permit, as processing permits for such systems is not inherently complex or costly and does not correlate well with system valuation."

The cities of Burbank, San Bernardino and San Clemente, and the county governments of San Diego and Ventura, stand out as among the most solar friendly: they issue solar permits over-the-counter and waive the fees entirely. These municipalities recognize the importance of having local, clean, renewable sources of power that reduce global warming and provide long-term stability of energy prices. The municipalities that make solar customers wait the longest tend to subject permit applications to unnecessary reviews by fire, planning and public works departments.

A detailed report with a definitive PV permit fee comparison of southern California jurisdictions with specific recommendations for solar permitting is at: <http://angeles.sierraclub.org/energy/pvfeereport.asp>, co-authored by survey team leader Kurt Newick (408-370-9636), editor Carl Mills (408-428-3656), Jim Stewart, and Tamara Winter Compeán.

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