Large-scale solar systems are becoming increasingly common throughout the United States as costs go down and solar becomes competitive with fossil fuels. Local governments are important stakeholders in the large-scale solar development process for permitting, inspection, planning, zoning, and tax regulations and processes. Local governments can encourage the growth of solar projects by providing developers with clarity, consistency, and transparency in regulations and processes. With the right strategies in place, local governments can provide maximum siting options for large-scale solar while preserving the community’s character and its cultural and ecological resources.

SolSmart is a national program offering no-cost technical assistance to help communities expand solar energy development. For interested communities, SolSmart provides assistance focused on reviewing and improving the planning and zoning processes for large-scale solar systems. The chart below outlines how communities can meet the official criteria to achieve SolSmart Silver designation, with an emphasis on large-scale solar. For more information, visit us at SolSmart.org or contact us at info@solsmart.org.

Requirements for SolSmart Bronze
(Bronze pre-requisites must be completed to be awarded Silver designation)

- Solar Statement
- Permitting Checklist
- Zoning Review
- Bronze Pre-requisites Completed
- 20 Permitting & Inspection Points
- 20 Planning & Zoning Points
- 20 additional Points
- Bronze Points Completed (at least 60)

Requirements for SolSmart Silver

- Zoning Determination Memo
- Solar Training for Permitting & Inspection Staff
- Draft Zoning Language
- Regulatory Process
- Large-scale solar ordinance
- Silver Completed
- 100 Total Points

*See full credit language below for a process to develop a large-scale solar ordinance

Prerequisite credits with an emphasis on large-scale solar

Zoning Review (PZ-1): Review zoning requirements and identify restrictions that intentionally or unintentionally prohibit solar PV development. Compile findings in a memo. (Required for Bronze)
- Specifically identify if zoning regulations address large-scale solar energy.

Zoning Determination Memo (PZ-4): Post an online document from the Planning/Zoning Department that states accessory use solar PV is allowed by-right in all major zones (e.g. via a zoning determination letter). (Required for Silver, if PZ-5 isn’t achieved)
- Identify zoning regulations and processes that are applicable to large-scale solar development such a special or conditional use permit process. (Required for Silver)
Priority Credits to address large-scale solar

PI-17: Train fire and safety staff on specific plans and procedures for responding to an emergency at a large-scale solar PV system within the jurisdiction. (This may include a walk-through of the site, coordinated with the project’s owner/operator).

PZ-2: Present PZ-1 memo findings to planning commission or relevant body.

PZ-3: Draft proposed language for changes to zoning code based on PZ-1 memo and PZ-2 dialogue. Involve planners and/or local zoning experts in the creation of the draft language.

PZ-9: Ensure the zoning ordinance establishes a clear regulatory pathway for large-scale solar PV (e.g. through a special use permit or through inclusion among allowed conditional uses).

PZ-10: Ensure the zoning ordinance includes a native perennial vegetation and/or habitat-friendly ground cover requirement or standard for large-scale solar PV.

PZ-12: Ensure the zoning ordinance requires a decommissioning plan that outlines the terms and conditions for a large-scale solar PV system’s proper removal at the end of its useful life cycle or in the event of cessation of operation. (The decommissioning plan may include steps to remove the system, requirements for disposal and/or recycling of system components, and restoration as needed to allow for return to agriculture or other land use).

PZ-13: Ensure the zoning ordinance establishes solar energy zones and/or solar overlays for large-scale solar PV.

PZ-18: Train planning staff on best practices in planning and zoning for solar PV. Training must have occurred in the past five years.

PZ-21: Develop a solar PV assessment that identifies all feasible sites for large-scale solar PV development within a jurisdiction.

Additional credits to consider for large-scale solar development

PZ-17: Post an online fact sheet that provides an overview of what zoning allows for solar PV under what conditions (e.g. types and sizes of solar systems permitted, the processes required, and other relevant information).

PZ-19: Draft new or updated language and provide a timeline for the inclusion of specific solar PV goals, metrics, and/or strategies into existing and/or future plans.

PZ-20: Include specific solar PV goals, metrics, and/or strategies in the most current version of relevant local plans (e.g. energy plan, climate plan, comprehensive plan).