# Automated Permitting and SolSmart Designation

The permitting and inspection of solar photovoltaic (PV) systems is an aspect of local government where changes can have a major impact on the cost of going solar for residents and businesses. Thousands of dollars can be added to a solar system's price tag due to the time and expenses involved for a solar installation company to obtain a construction permit and permission to operate from the local Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ). Lengthy permitting timelines can result in homeowners and small businesses backing out of contracts, forcing installers to pass sunk costs on to other customers. In short, the permitting process literally makes or breaks solar deals.

This is why Permitting & Inspection is a foundational category of the designation criteria for SolSmart, a U.S. Department of Energy funded program to recognize "solar friendly" communities. In addition to other requirements, local governments must earn at least 20 points in Permitting and Inspection to achieve Bronze-level designation, provide training for permitting and inspection staff to earn Silver, and commit to a three-business day or less turn around for small rooftop permits to achieve Gold.

Automated solutions for permitting solar PV and storage systems are an emerging best practice for AHJs to streamline, and improve the accuracy of, permitting and inspections. Communities that use an automated permitting process (APP) can earn up to 100 points or more toward SolSmart designation. APPs also make it easy for the community to meet SolSmart's Gold-level requirement of committing to a three-business day or less turn around on small rooftop solar permits.

## SolSmart Designation Points

There are different types of solar and storage APPs, some of which were custom built by a community for their sole use. As such, some APPs may fulfill certain SolSmart credits and earn points toward designation while others may not. Also, even with the use of an APP, additional information will likely need to be posted online to earn SolSmart credits. For example, the SolarAPP+ tool developed by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (with support from SolSmart and others), automatically creates a customized inspection checklist based on the proposed system components and configuration, but additional information about the inspection process and how to schedule will need to be posted online to earn points for PI-12 and PI-20. Also, the use of an APP alone may not fulfill certain credits but could greatly facilitate the ability to meet a credit, such as PI-10, which requires charging $500 or less for a residential permit. During the designation process the SolSmart team will help each applicant determine which credits they are eligible for. The following table provides some initial guidance for communities considering how automated permitting can help achieve SolSmart designation.

### Benefits of Automated Permitting:

- Increased efficiency of building department staff with attention focused on non-standard systems
- Consistent and complete applications from installers
- Improved code compliance through automated review
- Reduced staff training needs since less staff are needed to review solar permits
- Lower costs to consumers helps increase solar deployment to meet community clean energy or carbon reduction goals

| Credit Identifier | Credit Points | Credit Language | Additional Notes |
|---|---|---|---|
| PI-4 | 20 | Post an online statement confirming a three-business day turnaround time for small rooftop solar PV. | APPs allow communities to easily confirm that they will turnaround most small rooftop PV systems instantly. The statement should state that APP qualified projects are approved instantaneously and include the expected review time for non-automated reviews (which does not have to be less than 3 days to earn the points). |
| PI-5 | 5 | Distinguish between solar PV systems qualifying for streamlined and standard permit review. | All APPs have criteria to determine which systems qualify for the automated process and which don't. A community's public solar permitting checklist should include a link to, or details about, which projects are eligible for the APP. |
| PI-6 | 5 | Require no more than one permit application form for a small rooftop solar PV system. | Most communities with an APP require only one permit application. |
| PI-7 | 10 | Adopt a standard solar PV permit application form aligned with best practices. | All APPs use a standard application form; however, those that only collect basic information and do not perform an automated review are not aligned with best practices. |
| PI-8 | 20 | Provide an online process for solar PV permit submission and approval. | All APPs use an online process. |
| PI-10 | 5 | Demonstrate that residential permit fees for solar PV are $500 or less. | Use of an APP facilitates the charging of permitting fees that are well below $500 by substantially reducing the effort needed to issue permits. |
| PI-12 | 10 | Post solar PV inspection requirements online, including the inspection process and what details inspectors will review. | Some APPs meet part of this criteria by creating inspection forms that detail what is to be reviewed, but to earn this credit additional details about the inspection process, such as how to schedule, will need to be posted online. |
| PI-19 | 10 | Post an online checklist detailing the required permit(s), submittals, and steps of your community's energy storage system permitting process. | Providing clear and transparent information about the ESS permitting process complements an APPs streamline approval process. Information about the APP process should be included on the permitting checklist but additional information on how to obtain a permit for systems that are not eligible for the APP will also need to be included. |
| PI-20 | 10 | Post energy storage system inspection requirements online, including the inspection process and what details inspectors will review. | Some APPs meet part of this criteria by creating inspection forms that detail what is to be reviewed, but to earn this credit additional details about the inspection process, such as how to schedule, will need to be posted online. |
| IA-1 | 5-20 | Innovative Action Credit | APPs can earn 10 IACs; APPs that allow for instantaneous approval will earn 5 IACs and APPs that create customized inspection forms based on submitted project information will earn 5 IACs; additional points for other innovative APPs may be available. |