



Office of the City Manager

October 30, 2023

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council  
From: *Dee* Dee Williams-Ridley, City Manager  
Re: Online Standardized Plan Review and Permitting for Rooftop Solar Systems

Customers submitting permit applications to install solar systems can now use SolarAPP+, standardized plan review software that can run compliance checks and immediately process building permit approvals for eligible rooftop solar systems. Activating the system not only ensures Berkeley's compliance with Senate Bill (SB) 379, but also fulfills a City Council referral to implement a software solution. Additionally, it aligns the Planning and Development Department's ongoing initiative to improve customer services for both clients and the Berkeley community by including additional resources for remote services from the Permit Service Center (PSC).

#### CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

Solar permit customers now have two submittal options available, each capable of expediting the approval process for compliant projects. While SolarAPP+ promises nearly instant approval of permits for eligible rooftop solar systems, the existing in-person submittal option also continues to be available. This approach ensures a smooth transition to SolarAPP+ for those ready to embrace it, while offering a seamless and consistent experience for others who may prefer the conventional in-person permit processing, which generally also results in permit approval within 24 hours. The goal is to accommodate a wide range of preferences and facilitate the adoption of SolarAPP+ while respecting the needs of all stakeholders in the process.

#### BACKGROUND

In 2020, the National Renewable Energy Laboratory initiated a collaborative project to create standardized plan review software for solar permits. It began making its Solar APP+ software available to local jurisdictions free of charge, and in September 2022 SB379 was signed into law, requiring cities to adopt this or a comparable program to instantly approve compliant applications to install solar systems.

On November 3, 2022 the Berkeley City Council adopted a referral authored by Councilmember Harrison, and co-sponsored by Councilmember Hahn and Mayor Arreguin, to swiftly apply for grant funding and implement this solar permitting solution.

Planning staff secured a \$15,000 Department of Energy (DoE) grant, which was earmarked to fast-track the implementation of SolarAPP+. This financial support played a pivotal role in enhancing the efficiency of the adoption process, empowering the department to streamline procedures, and reduce the costs associated with transitioning to the SolarAPP+ platform.

This year, working closely with the City Information Technology Department, Planning staff engaged the services of a technology consultant and third-party vendors to integrate SolarApp+ with the existing permitting software. This involved writing new code and conducting extensive user testing. These efforts were paid for with the DoE grant funds.

cc: LaTanya Bellow, Deputy City Manager  
Anne Cardwell, Deputy City Manager  
Jenny Wong, City Auditor  
Farimah Brown, City Attorney  
Mark Numainville, City Clerk  
Matthai Chakko, Assistant to the City Manager  
Jordan Klein, Director, Planning and Development Department

Attachment 1: Council referral from Nov. 3, 2022



Kate Harrison  
Vice Mayor, District 4

CONSENT CALENDAR  
November 3, 2022

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Vice Mayor Harrison, Councilmember Hahn, and Mayor Arreguin

Subject: Resolution and Referral Supporting Local Implementation of SB 379: Online Instant Solar Permitting Process For Residential Solar And Solar-Plus-Storage Energy Systems

RECOMMENDATION

1. Adopt resolution supporting local implementation of SB 379 requiring cities to adopt online instant solar permitting process for residential solar and solar-plus-storage energy systems; and
2. Refer to the City Manager and Planning Department, consistent with SB 379 and climate goals, to explore and move swiftly to apply for applicable grants and implement automated solar permitting platforms to reduce permit review time for solar energy and battery storage systems.

CURRENT SITUATION, EFFECTS, AND RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

Consistent with prior state law, the City of Berkeley approves administratively within one day applications to install solar energy systems through the issuance of low-cost building permits or similar non-discretionary permits for small residential rooftop solar energy systems. However, the new SB 379 law requires permits to be approved instantly by next year using an online and automated permitting platform that verifies code compliance and issues permits in real time. Non-competitive state grant monies are now available to help Berkeley with the transition, and it is in the public interest to apply for these grants and swiftly comply with the new law consistent with the City's ambitious climate goals.

BACKGROUND

Berkeley is committed as part of its Climate Action Plan and related policies to reduce greenhouse emissions, including through deploying renewable electric technology locally. Local clean and reliable energy is key to a more resilient electric grid in the face of increasing power shutoffs and electricity shortages. Berkeley's electric load is expected to increase significantly as a result of vehicle and building electrification policies and trends.

California State Senate Bill (SB) No. 379, signed into law on September 16, 2022, requires most cities and counties in California to implement an online, automated permitting platform that verifies code compliance and issues permits in real time for a

solar energy system that is no larger than 38.4 kilowatts alternating current nameplate rating and an energy storage system paired with a solar energy system that is no larger than 38.4 kilowatts alternating current nameplate rating.

The goal of the law is to decrease approval times for residential solar and solar-plus-storage systems, cut permitting costs for local governments and homeowners, and help California meet its greenhouse gas emission reduction goals.

The law prescribes a compliance schedule for satisfying these requirements, with cities with populations greater than 50,000 required to satisfy the requirements by September 30, 2023. The law also requires cities to report to the California Energy Commission (CEC) when it is in compliance with specified requirements, and to self-certify their compliance with the law's provisions when applying for certain funds from the CEC.

In 2020, the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL), a federal research center sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy, released free software called SolarAPP+ that cities and counties can adopt to process permits for residential solar energy systems. In addition, the CEC is operating a program as part of the Senate Bill 129 (Skinner, Budget Act of 2021) budget to deploy \$20 million in non-competitive grants to help cities and counties adopt and integrate online automated permitting systems such as SolarAPP+ into existing Berkeley permitting systems like Accela, thereby streamlining compliance and recordkeeping. Funding is intended to help local governments in California recover the cost of establishing an eligible automated, online solar permitting platform. In most cases, most of the funding will be used to reimburse staff or consultant time associated with implementing the software.

Berkeley is eligible for a maximum funding award of \$80,000 based on its population size. The application deadline is May 1, 2023.

Jurisdictions such as Pleasant Hill, San Ramon, Sonoma County, Stockton, and Benicia have successfully deployed SolarAPP+ and San Jose, Los Angeles, Alameda County and Vacaville have adopted similar automated permitting software and reduced permit review time.

It is in the public interest to move swiftly to apply for applicable grants and implement automated solar permitting platforms to reduce permit review time for solar energy and battery storage systems consistent with SB 379. This item includes a resolution in support of this objective and a referral to staff to apply for non-competitive grants as appropriate.

#### FISCAL IMPACTS OF RECOMMENDATION

Staff time will be needed to complete the referral, but costs may be offset by non-competitive CEC grants.

**ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

Supporting expeditious permitting of local renewable energy is key to achieving the City's greenhouse gas reduction goals.

**CONTACT PERSON**

Vice Mayor Kate Harrison, (510) 981-7140

RESOLUTION NO. ##,###-N.S.

SUPPORTING LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION OF SENATE BILL NO. 379, ONLINE  
INSTANT SOLAR PERMITTING PROCESS FOR RESIDENTIAL SOLAR  
AND SOLAR-PLUS-STORAGE ENERGY SYSTEMS

WHEREAS, Berkeley is committed as part of its Climate Action Plan and related policies to reduce greenhouse emissions, including through deploying renewable electric technology locally; and

WHEREAS, local clean and reliable energy is key to a more resilient electric grid in the face of increasing electric shutoffs and electricity shortages; and

WHEREAS, Berkeley's electric load is expected to increase significantly as a result of vehicle and building electrification policies and trends; and

WHEREAS, state law requires cities to approve administratively applications to install solar energy systems through the issuance of low-cost building permits or similar non-discretionary permit and develop a streamlined permitting process for the installation of small residential rooftop solar energy system; and

WHEREAS, California State Senate Bill (SB) No. 379, signed into law on September 16, 2022, requires most cities and counties in California to implement an online, automated permitting platform that verifies code compliance and issues permits in real time for a solar energy system, as defined, that is no larger than 38.4 kilowatts alternating current nameplate rating and an energy storage system, as defined, paired with a solar energy system that is no larger than 38.4 kilowatts alternating current nameplate rating; and

WHEREAS, the law prescribes a compliance schedule for satisfying these requirements, with cities with populations greater than 50,000 required to satisfy the requirements by September 30, 2023; and

WHEREAS, the law requires cities to report to the California Energy Commission (CEC) when it is in compliance with specified requirements, and to self-certify their compliance with the law's provisions when applying for specified funds from the CEC, as specified; and

WHEREAS, In 2020, the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL), a federal research center sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy, released free software called SolarAPP+ that cities and counties can adopt to process permits for residential solar energy systems; and

WHEREAS, the CEC is operating a program to deploy \$20 million in non-competitive grants to help cities and counties adopt and integrate online automated permitting systems such as SolarAPP+ into existing Berkeley permitting systems like Accela,

thereby streamlining compliance and recordkeeping; and

WHEREAS, jurisdictions such as Pleasant Hill, San Ramon, Sonoma County, Stockton, and Benicia have successfully deployed SolarAPP+ and San Jose, Los Angeles, Alameda County and Vacaville have adopted similar automated permitting software and reduced permit review time; and

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Council of the City of Berkeley that it hereby refers to the City Manager and Planning Department to move swiftly to apply for applicable grants and implement automated solar permitting platforms to reduce permit review time for solar energy and battery storage systems consistent with SB 379.