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## Process for solar permits simplified

9 East Bay cities OK standard to cut costs

By David R. Baker

When homeowners buy a solar system, they're not just paying for panels - they're paying for paperwork.

Each city has its own process for approving permits for homeowners who want to go solar. In some communities, the process is quick, easy and cheap. In others, it's an expensive pain. Solar installers, who usually take care of permit applications for their customers, waste precious staff time navigating the different requirements, adding to the cost of every system they sell.

So on Tuesday, nine East Bay cities said they would adopt the same standardized and streamlined permitting process for solar power.

The cities have developed an application process that, for the vast majority of homes, will eliminate the need for a structural engineering assessment, a step that can add hundreds if not thousands of dollars to the final bill. In six of the cities, permits will be handled over the counter, reviewed and approved the same day. The remaining three cities have agreed to process permits within three to seven days.

"It's about customer satisfaction," said Andrew Birch, chief executive officer of Sungevity, one of several solar companies that helped develop the new permit process. "If they get their systems faster, they refer their friends more, and that increases the uptake of the technology."

### ***Trying to cut 'soft costs'***

Fees will still vary from one city to another. But none will be higher than the cost of paying for the city employees who must process permit applications. The average will be \$236. A 2012 state law caps permit fees for most residential solar systems at \$500.

The cities are members of a consortium called the East Bay Green Corridor, devoted to boosting environmentally friendly jobs in the region. They are: Alameda, Albany, Berkeley, El Cerrito, Emeryville, Hayward, Oakland, Richmond and San Leandro.

The move toward standardization may seem simple. But it's something that solar companies - and the federal government - have wanted for years.

While the price of solar panels has plunged in the last five years, the other costs involved with installation haven't. Those "soft costs" - such as permitting, inspecting and connecting to the state's power grid - now constitute roughly one-third of a solar system's total cost, Birch said.

A typical, 3-kilowatt home solar system in California costs about \$17,300, according to state statistics.

Soft costs pose such a problem that the U.S. Department of Energy has made cutting them a priority of its SunShot Initiative, an effort to make photovoltaic solar power as cheap as electricity from plants burning fossil fuels by the end of the decade.

### ***Moving permits online***

The Green Corridor cities will start using the new permitting process by Sept. 22. Several - including Berkeley and Oakland - hope to move the process online. And they want other cities across California and the rest of the country to follow suit, making the permit process simpler and more predictable for homeowners and installation companies alike.

"We're trying to work toward the most efficient system, which will be streamlined, create a lot fewer steps, and enable the contractor to do as much as possible electronically," said Carla Din, director of the Green Corridor consortium.

David R. Baker is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: [dbaker@sfchronicle.com](mailto:dbaker@sfchronicle.com) Twitter: [@DavidBakerSF](https://twitter.com/DavidBakerSF)