Senate Bill 617 - Solar Access Act

Sen. Scott Wiener

From record-breaking droughts to unprecedented wildfire seasons, the impacts of climate change are already being felt across California. The state needs to accelerate the transition to clean energy grid, and rooftop solar power is an important part of the solution.

Unfortunately, red tape often prevents homeowners from putting solar on their roofs. The permitting and inspection processes are often non-standardized, inefficient and time-consuming, adding thousands to the cost of installing solar.

Instant and online systems, on the other hand, can produce 14 times more solar permits than traditional over-the-counter processes. Cities like San Jose, Oceanside, Los Angeles and Vacaville have already "gone instant" and are a model for California. San Jose saw 600% growth in rooftop PV permit applications after moving from in-person permit processing to online and instant. These experiences show that streamlined permitting doesn't compromise safety, but can boost local growth, increase community resilience and make better use of government resources — all while contributing to the state's climate goals.

SB 617

Before a contractor can install a solar system, they need to apply for a permit from the local building department. SB 617 will allow more homeowners to install solar by streamlining the permitting and inspection processes.

The bill will:

- Require cities and counties with populations over 10,000 to allow homeowners' contractors to receive an instant permit online for standard solar and solar-plus-storage systems, via software such as the SolarAPP+. (See box to the right for more information.)
- Require cities and counties to offer virtual inspections for these systems via live video (e.g., Zoom), recorded video, or photos. (See box to the right for more information.)
- Create a program at the California Energy Commission that provides technical assistance and grants to help cities and counties comply with these requirements. The funds would come from leftover money in the now-defunct New Solar Homes Partnership Program (subsidies for new homes to install solar).

Overall, the bill would increase the number of households installing solar and storage systems, help California meet its greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals, increase the resiliency of homes, especially during public safety power shutoffs, reduce electricity costs to homeowners, reduce administrative costs for local governments, and create solar installation jobs.

U.S. Department of Energy

National Renewable Energy Laboratory

About SOLARAPP+

Last year, the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL), a division of the federal Department of Energy, developed software called SolarAPP+ that processes permits for solar and solar-plus-storage systems. SolarAPP+ asks the contractor a series of questions to verify the solar system's design is safe, and then issues a permit automatically. SolarAPP+, developed in partnership with building safety experts and the solar industry, helps local governments and installers operate more efficiently without compromising the safety or quality of solar systems. SolarAPP+ is free for cities and counties, integrates with their existing software systems, and can be adjusted to the characteristics of the area (e.g., snowfall). Jurisdictions, such as San Jose and Los Angeles have deployed automated permitting software similar to SolarAPP+, with great success. San Jose saw a sixfold increase in solar systems installed after they adopted automated permitting.

About virtual inspections

Many building departments have responded to COVID-19 by instituting virtual inspections for residential solar systems. This change has significantly increased the efficiency of inspections. Inspectors no longer need to drive to installations, and contractors no longer need to wait hours for inspectors to arrive. Los Angeles County building department, which served as a model for other municipalities, has offered virtual inspections since the spring of 2019, reducing the resources spent on inspection while ensuring the solar systems are installed safely.

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