WHAT IS SOLSMART?

SolSmart is a new national designation program, funded by the U.S. Department of Energy through the Solar Powering America by Recognizing Communities (SPARC) initiative, designed to recognize communities that have taken key steps to address local barriers to solar energy and foster the growth of mature local solar markets. The SolSmart program primarily seeks to address “solar soft costs,” or business process or administrative costs that can increase the time and money it takes to install a solar energy system — costs which are then passed on to solar customers. While only certain local government policies and processes (such as permitting, planning, and zoning) are the source of some soft costs, local governments are in a unique position to reduce soft costs and take action to promote the use of solar locally.

The SolSmart designation program will provide high-profile, national recognition for communities that have made it cheaper and easier for solar customers to invest in solar energy. In addition, achieving designation will send a signal to solar companies that a community is “open for business,” attracting new businesses and helping designees share in the economic development benefits attached to the solar industry.

Interested communities can apply for designation at www.solsmart.org using a simple online intake form (“application”). Upon receipt of this application, the Designation Program Administrator (led by the International City/County Management Association) will conduct a baseline assessment to determine which criteria the community currently meets based on previous efforts and which actions are still required before designation can be granted. Communities committed to pursuing SolSmart designation will be eligible for no-cost technical assistance (“TA”) from the Technical Assistance Provider (led by The Solar Foundation) and its team of national solar and local government experts to help communities meet the criteria for designation.

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BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

Benefits of Addressing Soft Costs
Addressing soft costs and other barriers can deliver a number of valuable benefits for key local stakeholders.

- Reducing soft costs can deliver an **increased return on investment for solar customers.** Complex or poorly-defined permitting processes can add significantly to the average cost of solar photovoltaic (PV) systems. For a typical five kilowatt (kW) system, onerous permitting processes can increase prices for solar customers by up to $700. Combined with other local regulatory policies and processes, the total price impact of local government “red tape” surrounding solar can be as high as $2,500 for a typical installation.¹

- Reducing red tape and more efficient approval processes can result in a **time and money savings for local governments**, representing a more productive use of constrained budgets and limited taxpayer resources. Improving access to information on technical and process requirements can decrease the volume of questions or requests for information from installers and the number of incomplete permit applications, reducing demands on staff time.²

- Improving the processes and policies giving rise to some soft costs can result in **improved business prospects for solar companies**. More than 33% of installers say there are at least three communities they avoid because of permitting difficulties.³ Those communities are missing out on local revenue and affordable solar. Addressing these and other local regulatory issues can open your community for solar business, resulting in **positive impacts on jobs and economic development**.

- Lowering soft costs encourages more residents to go solar and dramatically **reduces greenhouse gas emissions**. A five kW solar photovoltaic system can reduce carbon dioxide emissions equivalent to that produced from 500 gallons of gasoline (nearly as much consumed by a typical passenger vehicle in a single year) or the amount of carbon dioxide sequestered by nearly four acres of U.S. forests each year.

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BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

Benefits of Designation

Pursuing SolSmart designation through actions to reduce soft costs and foster a positive solar market environment can provide communities with a number of more specific benefits, including:

- **National recognition** on the SolSmart website, through media campaigns, and other means.

- An opportunity to **receive awards for exceeding basic program requirements** and further distinguish your community from its peers.

- The ability to apply to host a SolSmart Advisor, **fully-funded temporary staff** assigned to between 30 and 40 communities for up to six months to help communities achieve SolSmart designation.

What We Can Achieve Together

The U.S. Department of Energy SunShot Initiative has set a goal to reduce the installed cost of residential solar to $1.50 per watt by the year 2020. Though costs have declined dramatically over the last decade (and by over 40% since 2010), the national average cost for residential solar is still around $3.50 per watt — suggesting much still needs to be done to achieve the SunShot goal. Further complicating this issue is the fact that much of the observed reductions in installed costs over the last few years have come from declines in hardware costs. Soft costs have yet to experience the reductions required to maximize the affordability of solar.

Fortunately, local governments are in a prime position to address soft costs and enhance the affordability of solar for customers in their jurisdiction. While a single local government taking action may only have a local impact, the SolSmart goal of designating at least 300 U.S. communities by 2018 will allow these collective impacts to be felt across the nation.
APPLICATION PROCESS AND TIMELINE

Process

The SolSmart designation program is focused on recognizing communities that have worked to improve the solar friendliness of their community and encourage solar market development. The first step for communities pursuing SolSmart designation is to establish a vision and concrete goals for the adoption of solar within the community via a formal letter of commitment and commitment to tracking key metrics. Details on requirements for the letter of commitment can be found in the designation criteria document and the help sections of the online application.

Secondly, communities complete actions in two Foundational Categories: Permitting and Planning, Zoning and Development. These two categories are areas where local governments can have significant influence on the ease, time, and cost to go solar. Previous SunShot Initiative projects have confirmed that transparency and clarity in local regulations are building blocks that set the stage for subsequent progress on soft cost reductions.

There are two prerequisites in the Permitting and Planning, Zoning and Development categories which communities must complete to receive SolSmart Bronze (create a permit checklist and conduct a review and develop a memo on existing barriers to solar in the zoning code). To receive SolSmart Silver, there are additional prerequisites in the Planning, Zoning and Development category, and the Inspection category. In addition to completing the SolSmart Silver prerequisites, there is a prerequisite in Permitting for SolSmart Gold.

Communities can earn points by taking actions across Special Focus Categories of their choice, which also encourage solar cost reductions. These categories include: Inspection, Construction Codes, Solar Rights, Utility Engagement, Community Engagement, and Market Development and Finance. Special Awards are available for communities that demonstrate significant achievement in any of these categories. Communities can submit projects that are not listed under the pre-determined designation criteria to receive Innovation points. These programs or policies will be eligible for credit as determined by a panel of experts and can potentially be selected to be showcased on the SolSmart website.
APPLICATION PROCESS AND TIMELINE

Timeline

The SolSmart program will accept applications on a rolling basis. Upon receipt, applications will be sent to a designation review team. Within one week of submission, the team will provide a confirmation that a community’s application is under review. This process of review may take up to two weeks. Upon completion, SolSmart will inform the community whether they have earned designation.

Following receipt of a community’s application status, both designated and non-designated communities can proceed towards these next steps:

• If a community is deemed **not ready for designation**, the review team will inform the applicant and connect the program’s TA lead with the community to help address areas of improvement based on the original application.
  - Upon completion of TA, communities that were deemed not ready for designation will be encouraged and better positioned to re-submit their application for review.

• If a community is deemed **ready for designation**, a final check-in process will include the review team’s formalization of your designated status and an announcement that your community has satisfied all program requirements via press release, social media and website announcement.
  - Additionally, communities deemed ready for designation will receive a tiered designation and recognition at the annual SolSmart award ceremony.
  - All communities who are deemed ready for designation will also be given the opportunity to access TA through the program to continue improving local solar market conditions.
ACCESSING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Each community committed to pursuing SolSmart designation will be eligible to receive no-cost TA from the Technical Assistance Provider and its team of national solar and local government experts. As the goal of this TA is to help communities achieve designation, any assistance provided must be directed toward attaining one or more SolSmart designation criteria.

Communities can access TA in two distinct ways. First, communities that apply to the program but that do not meet the requirements for designation upon initial review will be able to access TA services to help them achieve SolSmart designation. Members of the Technical Assistance Provider team (see the full list of organizations on page 1) will work with communities to meet the program prerequisites and address any additional actions necessary to achieve the points required to earn designation. Alternatively, communities that have already satisfied enough criteria to achieve the Bronze or Silver level of designation may indicate during the application process whether TA in achieving a higher level of designation is desired. While communities seeking higher levels of designation are eligible for TA, communities that have yet to achieve any level of SolSmart designation will be prioritized for service.

Communities can receive TA on any of the following actions to help them achieve SolSmart designation:

- Overall program prerequisite actions
- SolSmart Bronze prerequisite actions listed in the Permitting and Planning, Zoning, and Development categories
- SolSmart Silver prerequisite actions
- SolSmart Gold prerequisite actions
- Additional actions within any of the eight criteria categories
- Approved innovation actions
ACCESSING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

SolSmart Advisors Program

In addition to the standard no-cost TA services offered though the SolSmart program, communities pursuing designation can also apply to host a SolSmart Advisor – temporary, fully-funded staff provided through SolSmart to help host communities achieve designation. Advisors will evaluate existing local government policies and processes, develop plans for guiding their host communities toward designation, and apply proven industry-leading best practices in the execution of these plans. SolSmart Advisors will assist communities through engagements lasting up to six months.

Host communities will be selected through a highly competitive process. Factors for selection include: level of community need (based on benchmarking results from the designation application process) balanced with the achievability of what the applicant hopes to accomplish through an Advisor; potential for impact (based on population served; smaller communities can apply as a group or through a regional organization such as a Council of Governments or Regional Planning Commission); a plan for efficient use of the Advisor; geographic and socioeconomic diversity; previous engagements with the SolSmart program (e.g., Early Adopter status), and; commitment to attaining SolSmart designation. Additional factors — including long-term opportunities for Advisors in the community and an ability and willingness to cost share — are not required but will help make the community a more competitive applicant.

Applications for the first round of host communities will be accepted through the end of June 2016.
HOW TO GET HELP

For questions about the designation program, please contact:
Phone: 202-962-3622
Email: SolSmart@icma.org

For questions about technical assistance, please contact:
Phone: 703-828-4531
Email: phaddix@solarfound.org