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San Francisco supervisor calls on State to streamline permitting for residential rooftop solar panels and battery storage

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed a resolution authored by Supervisor Rafael Mandelman to support state action to streamline permitting for residential solar energy systems.

SAN FRANCISCO — Today the Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution supporting California State Senate Bill 379 (Wiener), the Solar Access Act.

The bill would require cities and counties to adopt an online instant permitting system, such as SolarAPP+, to allow residents to instantly obtain a permit for simple residential solar and solar-plus-storage systems in real time. SolarAPP+ is an automated permitting software developed by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory and funded by the US Department of Energy to provide an alternative to expensive and time intensive residential solar and energy storage permitting processes. Currently, local permitting processes are often time-consuming and costly, including in San Francisco, where approvals for some solar systems can take two weeks or much longer in some cases.

One San Francisco homeowner seeking to install a solar array and battery storage system shared their recent experience: “It took more than two and a half years to resolve a permitting issue in San Francisco. Due to changing requirements, I became subject to an incredibly complicated path to approval for my solar and storage system, which we originally decided to do because of our firm belief in renewable energy. This resulted in countless meetings, phone calls, and emails to try to understand what was needed of me. And after working hard to comply with all requirements, the cost to move forward continued to stack up exponentially, which made me wonder if this was all worthwhile. Having a streamlined permitting system would have saved me a lot of hassle, grief, time and money.”

“This feels like one more area where San Francisco just cannot get out of its own way,” said Supervisor Rafael Mandelman, who authored the resolution, noting that San Francisco’s Climate Action Plan sets a goal of reaching net-zero emissions by 2040. “Residential rooftop solar is an important part of meeting our climate action goals, while also making our city more resilient in the face of more frequent power outages due to wildfires and other increasingly common extreme weather events. We can’t afford to let bureaucratic delays get in the way of our clean energy and climate resilience goals.”

Automated solar permitting systems have already been implemented in California jurisdictions including San Jose, Los Angeles, Alameda and Sonoma Counties, Pleasant Hill, Stockton, and others. SB 379 seeks to expand access to instant solar permitting to residential rooftop solar and battery storage customers statewide. By making it easier for more Californians to go solar and add energy storage, the state can reduce carbon emissions, increase resilience to wildfires and public safety power shutoffs, and increase job opportunities in all communities.

With \$20 million funding secured in the Governor's 2021 budget, jurisdictions can apply for grants to support the staff time needed to implement SolarAPP+ or another automated permitting system. SB 379 will support the adoption of tools like SolarAPP+, drive down the cost of solar and solar-plus-storage systems and make it more accessible to Californians.

"By cutting red tape and high costs at the building department, SolarAPP+ will bring solar to more San Franciscans," said Igor Tregub, Senior Policy Advisor at the California Solar and Storage Association. "Already, rooftop solar is growing fastest in working-class and middle-class communities, and SolarAPP+ will strengthen this trend."

"This is a great first step to bringing automated solar permitting to San Francisco," said Senator Scott Wiener. "The City has consistently set a high standard for climate forward policies, and it's time for us to catch up to cities like San Jose and Stockton that have streamlined their solar permit approvals. Thank you to Supervisor Mandelman for leading on this important issue." Senator Scott Wiener

"Automated solar permitting will save people time and money, and supercharge the adoption of rooftop solar" said Nick Josefowitz, Chief Policy Officer of SPUR, one of the organizations co-sponsoring SB 379. "If all jurisdictions were to adopt automated solar permitting for simple residential rooftop systems, we estimate Californians will save \$7.5 billion in unnecessary costs over the next decade."

"The latest IPCC report released this week urges immediate action on climate at all levels, making bills like Sen. Wiener's SB-379 Solar Access Act more crucial than ever," said Laura Deehan, State Director for Environment California. "Today's action by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors brings us one step closer to getting this bill passed and making rooftop solar more accessible for all."

District 8 Supervisor Rafael Mandelman, along with Supervisors Ahsha Safai, Gordon Mar, and Myrna Melgar, introduced this resolution on March 22nd, and the Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to adopt it on April 5th. In January, SB 379 passed out of the Senate with a bipartisan 31 to 1 vote. It will soon be headed to the Assembly to be heard in committee.

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