

Permitting Solar PV in Massachusetts

A Guide for Municipalities

This series of case studies was developed for municipalities in Massachusetts to be used as a guide to improve permitting processes for residential and commercial solar photovoltaic (PV) systems.

The case studies highlight how various municipalities in Massachusetts have improved permitting processes for solar PV, thereby saving time and money for government officials, solar installers, and residents.

These resources have been developed by the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources, with support from the Clean Energy States Alliance.

Municipalities covered in this series:

- Boston
- Northampton
- Pittsfield
- Wellfleet

Pittsfield, MA

Population
45,000

Location
Berkshire County
Solar PV Installations
117

Generation Capacity
>4.2 MW



Time, Money, and Transparency

Pittsfield was selected as a case study for simplifying its permitting process through online integration. The city developed an online permitting process empowering its constituents and staff with the ability to apply, track, and manage permitting applications online. These actions have saved time and money for the building department, installers, and residents alike.



Image courtesy: <http://www.cetonline.org/solar-power-homes/>

THE CITY OF PITTSFIELD

With an estimated population of 45,000, Pittsfield is the largest city of Berkshire County. In 2012, the city is a designee in the Massachusetts Green Communities program, and also participated in Solarize Mass Pittsfield.

The building inspector in Pittsfield, stated that between January and October of 2015, the building department issued about two to three solar permits each week. At present, Pittsfield has 117 solar PV installations, totaling more than 4.2 MW of installed capacity.²

MOVING TO THE CLOUD

Prior to January 2015, the City of Pittsfield had a paper-based application process for all permits. The Pittsfield Building Department recently began using online software which automates and simplifies the permitting process for all building types.

Along with other cities and towns in the Berkshires, Pittsfield signed up for the [Berkshire Online Permitting Program](#), created by a Boston-based software company. The Berkshire Online Permitting Program is an online platform that incorporates all of its participating cities' permitting processes. Residents or their representatives can now make and track all of their permitting applications via web, and city officials are able to respond quickly, and more effectively.

THE PERMIT REVIEW PROCESS

Pittsfield has a standardized permit process. After a permit application is submitted online by an applicant, the building inspectors' office undertakes a five-step process before the permit is issued. Figure one below illustrates this process and table one on the next page contains the associated fees.

Figure 1: The five-step solar PV permit process in the City of Pittsfield, before the permit is issued



Solarize Mass & Green Communities

Solarize Mass is a community based campaign that aims to increase the adoption of small-scale solar. Tiered pricing structures save participants more money as more people sign contracts.

The Green Communities designation and grant program seeks to cut energy costs and strengthen economies in all 351 Massachusetts municipalities. Communities must meet specific criteria after which the state will provide grants to finance energy efficiency and renewable energy projects.

"The paperwork for permit applications would run a foot high, earlier. Now, everything is streamlined."

-Conversations with the building inspector, City of Pittsfield

THE PERMIT REVIEW PROCESS

(CONTD.)

Once the building and electrical permit application is submitted, the city staff reviews it and a building inspector is assigned. If the application is approved, the building inspector makes an email request to the tax collector for clearance to issue a permit. The new system prevents the city from issuing permits to those not up to date on their property taxes. Next, the electrical inspector reviews the documents. When all of the structural considerations are met, the building inspector will formally issue the permit.

Table 1: Permit fees in Pittsfield

Fee Details	Building Permit	Electrical Permit
Fee	US\$ 6 / 1000	US\$ 70*
Minimum	US\$ 35	US\$ 35
* This fee includes two inspections: rough and final		

THE PROBLEM WITH PAPER

Before Pittsfield's online system was available, applicants completed paper permit applications. Although city staff was familiar with the system, the process increased desk-to-desk time for inspectors as they passed along documents and handled them separately. Often files would sit on the desks of inspectors who spent ample time in the field. If an inspector required additional documents (from the applicant/contractor) or changes to the application, a letter asking for augmentation would be sent to the applicant via post. The slow flow of information increased wait times. Even when additional documents or changes were not required, permit applications took two to three weeks to process.

THE ONLINE SOLUTION

Online integration has reduced the processing time from two or three weeks to just a few days. Every time an officer clears an application, an email is sent to the next officer in the process with a message stating that the documents are ready for his or her review.

Transparent

The building commissioner can easily review all of the pending cases at a high level and instantly track their progress in the application process. Similarly, contractors can view and track their applications, bridging communication gaps between the building department and the applicant. This kind of transparency builds confidence in the system for the city's residents.

Responsive

Contractors now receive e-mails directly from the officer in charge of their case, and can respond online. When further communication is needed, the inspector or contractor is an e-mail or phone call away.

Economical

The significant reduction in response time for permit applications allows Pittsfield to process more applications in a shorter timeframe. With an increased stream of permits, the building department can save time and respond to a higher volume of project applications.

PERMITTING AND INSPECTION IN PITTSFIELD

Mayor Dan Bianchi consolidates
inspection services

A key factor in Pittsfield's success has been Mayor Dan Bianchi's creation of a "one stop shop" for all the inspection needs within the city. In 2014, Mayor Bianchi moved all of the inspectors' offices — health, building, utilities, fire, a community development agent, and a conservation agent — into a single office. The consolidation has improved communication amongst inspectors and their colleagues, allowing them to resolve internal issues and respond to queries more easily.

PITTSFIELD | Checklist for Permitting Best Practices

✓	Permitting Checklist		Eliminate Excessive Inspections
	Permitting Templates	✓	Implement Expedited Process
	Limited Inspection Time Windows	✓	Do Not Require Community-Specific Licenses
✓	Permitting Websites	✓	Simplified Permit Fees
✓	Online Permitting		Train Permitting Staff in Solar



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¹ <http://www.mass.gov/eea/docs/doer/green-communities/pubs-reports/gc-progress-report.pdf>

² Based on data tracked by the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources for qualified units under the Solar Carve-Out I and II programs. For more information, visit www.mass.gov/eea/energy-utilities-clean-tech/renewable-energy/solar/