

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

Wellfleet, MA

Population
2,700

Location
Barnstable County
Solar PV Installations
175
Generation Capacity
938 kW



Forward Thinking and Engaging the Community

Wellfleet was selected as a study for its response to the local Solarize campaign, which was wildly successful in the town. In six months, 133 residences went solar in a town of 2,700. The Wellfleet Building Department foresaw the uptick in solar installations and convened beforehand with installers to adequately prepare, improve transparency, and accelerate its permitting process.



Image courtesy: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nait/6915219490>

Wellfleet, MA

Solar Photovoltaics (PV) Permitting: Simple Steps to Streamline Processes

THE TOWN OF WELLFLEET

Wellfleet, a Massachusetts town of 2,700, is located on the Atlantic Ocean near the tip of Cape Cod. In 2013, the town participated in Solarize Mass, a group-purchase program for residential solar PV, and installed 665.7 kW of solar across 133 homes. On December 3, 2014, Wellfleet became a designee in the Massachusetts Green Communities program.

The Inspector of Buildings in Wellfleet, estimates that Wellfleet currently has 175 residential solar installations. According to a Massachusetts solar tracking program, this corresponds to roughly 938 kW of solar power capacity installed.

PERMITTING FOR SOLAR IN WELLFLEET

Prior to the Solarize Wellfleet campaign, few solar PV systems had been installed in Wellfleet. Since 2009, the building inspector estimates that roughly four to five residential solar permits were processed in Wellfleet each year. In anticipation of the Solarize campaign, the building department prepared for a drastic increase in residential solar permits. During the campaign, the building department issued close to 11 permits every month. Now that the Solarize program has ended, fewer residential solar permit applications are submitted, but the Wellfleet building department still processes three to four each month—12 times the yearly permits pulled prior to the Solarize Wellfleet campaign.

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.

*"Wellfleet Building Department
is great to deal with."*

- Permitting Manager for solar
installer operating in Wellfleet

PREPARING FOR SOLARIZE WELLFLEET

Community Engagement

To manage the significant surge in permit applications, Wellfleet's building department met with solar contractors before the Solarize campaign to prevent bottlenecks. In a series of meetings convened by a local resident, the participating solar contractors and the entire staff of the Wellfleet Building Department worked together to create a checklist and streamlined process that catered to each of their needs.

Checklist

The checklist was a critical document in reducing the solar permit application process time in Wellfleet. The document improves solar contractors adherence to the requirements of the building department when filing applications. The checklist standardized the process for processing solar permits in Wellfleet.

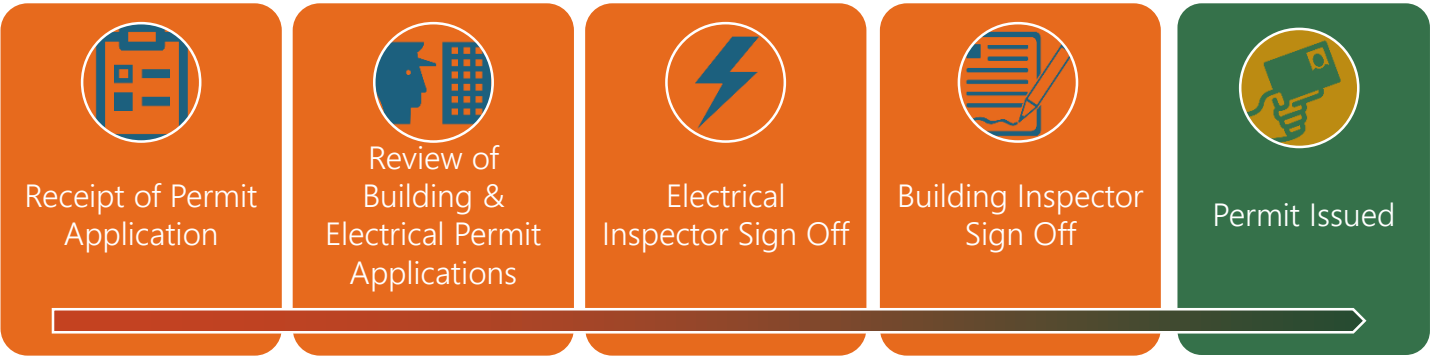
Wellfleet, MA

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THE PERMITTING PROCESS

Wellfleet has a standardized process for solar PV permits. Contractors submit their application for solar permits using a permitting checklist to the two-member building department. Figure one illustrates this process and table one lists the associated fees.

Figure 1: The five-step solar PV permit process in the Town of Wellfleet

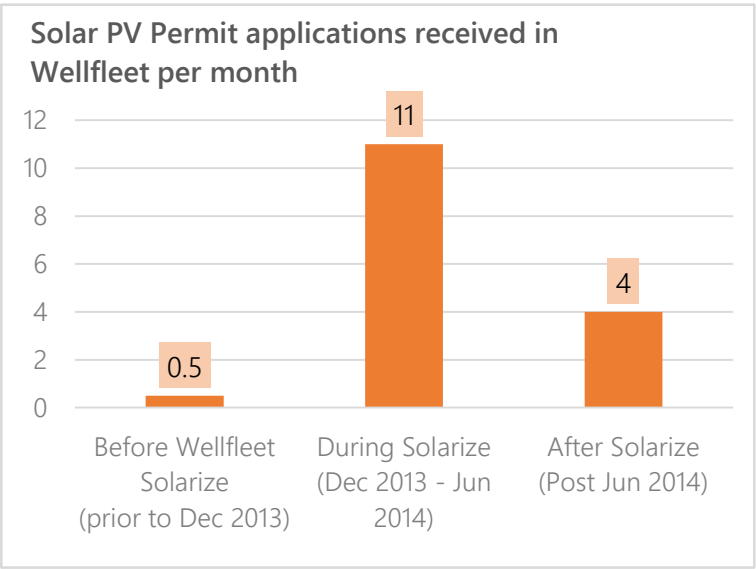


Typically, the building department will receive about 35-40 building permits for all proposed projects each month. The building inspector completes the plan review in one day, but additional administrative time is needed to process applications and most permits are issued within two weeks. The building department notifies contractors when their permit is ready.

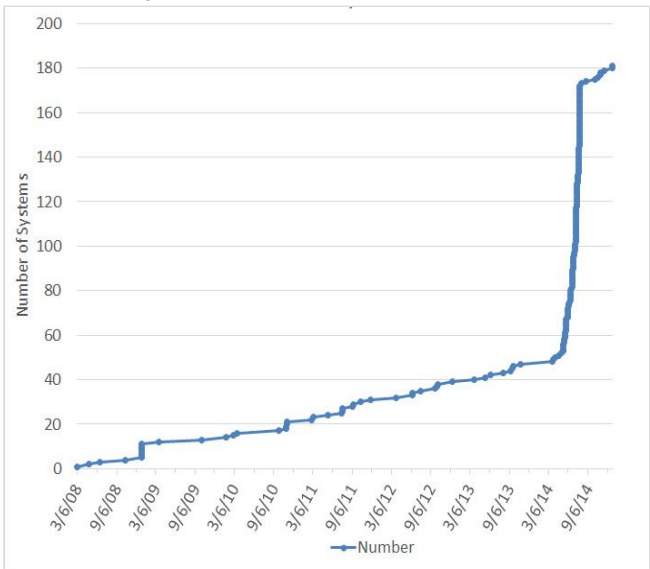
Table 1: Permit fees in Pittsfield

Fee Details	Building Permit	Electrical Permit	Application Fee
Fee	1% of the building cost	US\$ 120	US\$ 50

Graph 1: Solar PV Permit applications before, during, and after the Solarize Wellfleet campaign



Graph 2: Solarize Wellfleet and the surge in number of solar PV installations



Source: <http://solarizewellfleet.org/>

Wellfleet, MA

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RESULT

Wellfleet's solar permit streamlining strategy was based on a proactive and collaborative approach which reduced the amount of time spent processing PV permits. Through stakeholder engagement, participating Solarize installers were able to familiarize themselves with the processes of the Wellfleet Building Department, while the building department adapted their procedures to solar PV. The Town of Wellfleet has proven that increased transparency, collaboration, and education are key elements for a fast and effective solar permitting process.

WELLFLEET | 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 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/