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**Request for Comments on the Proposed Renewable Planning and Permitting Program
California Energy Commission 02-REN-1038, RP3 Grant**

**ASSESSED NEED:
UNIFORM PERMITTING AND GUIDELINES FOR SONOMA COUNTY**

Solar Sonoma County stakeholders have consistently identified permitting as a stumbling block to solar implementation. For this reason, we have already hosted several permitting forums in Sonoma County. While this has been fruitful, it has not begun to resolve the issues which, when rectified, will save time and money for both the consumer and installers.

Some of the key challenges are lack of building officials in municipal offices, permitting not completely streamlined nor online and a variance in standards for inspecting for fire codes and in general.

This problem will get worse as installations increase and the additional volume becomes the responsibility of an already over loaded and reduced building official staff. With the exception of Santa Rosa, all permitting offices have been reduced to one staff person already.

This problem was previously addressed by Solar Sonoma County in two Permitting Forums held in 2008 and 2009 and underwritten by PG &E and the Department of Energy. An additional forum is being planned for 2011.

In 2009, we hosted a Permitting Forum, which documented the following outcomes in its DOE report. The SSC Solar Permit and Code Subcommittee and the five-county Redwood Empire Association of Code Officials (REACO) developed and approved a regional uniform solar permit application and guidelines for residential solar installations up to 5 kilowatts in April 2009. Although all 10 local jurisdictions have accepted the uniform permit, both building officials are at varying stages and solar vendors are inconsistent in adopting the form due to collateral challenges such as severely reduced building department staffing in local jurisdictions and the need for further education and training in using the form for building department staff and vendors. SSC co-hosted a Solar Permitting Symposium in 2009 with PG&E to discuss regional permitting standards that included building officials and solar vendors.

We recommend the following as some of the key steps to expedite and refine the permitting process in Sonoma County:

- Brown bag round tables for installers and officials across all 10 jurisdictions to help them understand each other's role.
- A series of Permitting Forums that will illustrate through lecture, slide examples and expert testimony, the common issues and concerns while also leading the audience to productive outcomes and plans for streamlining.
- A series that addresses the requirements of commercial permitting, fire permitting and PG&E permitting as separate processes that are also nascent and require coordination and streamlining.
- A white paper to complement work already accomplished by Solar Tech, but aimed at the county level, which addresses best practices for both commercial and residential processes.
- Exploration of software applications to track solar only, review of existing codes in different jurisdictions
- Data collection from different departments to respond to increased demand brought about by the growth in solar installations while facilitating resource sharing and project data tracking.

Proposed Organizations for Implementation

Regional Climate Protection Campaign is a government body whose charter includes initiatives such as this. This unique body is already in place and perfectly poised to bring all stakeholders together representing all jurisdictions.

Solar Sonoma County (SSC) is nonprofit whose mission includes public education and outreach. SSC has a history of hosting educational forums including for permitting as is also has a proven list of experts in the field to draw from. Known as a neutral organization, SSC is well poised to bring these diverse stakeholders together to find beneficial solutions.

SSC is currently planning for these forums and educational events in 2011: Permitting Forum, The State of Renewables, Solar Leader's Circle, Clean Energy Advocate and the Solar Fair. These events will be co-sponsored by PG&E, a founding partner.

Sierra Club Loma Prieta Chapter, offers a look at city permitting trends across Sonoma.
<http://lomaprietaglobalwarming.sierraclub.org/solar.php>

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