

A Good Reason To Go Solar; City Considers Removing Sun Panel Permit Fees

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Berkeley could join four other Bay Area cities in waiving building permit fees on solar electricity panels if the City Council moves on an upcoming proposal.

Council Member Dona Spring said her idea to waive the fees would "put our money where our mouth is in regard to reducing greenhouse gases."

Spring's proposal will be heard before Tuesday's council meeting, but she said the city likely will wait until December or January to see if it could sustain a hit to its yearly budget, which is re-evaluated Sun that time.

If Berkeley waives the fees, it will join Fairfax, Sausalito, San Carlos and Los Altos Hills in waiving fees for installing solar electric systems, according to a Sierra Club study.

The study, released last month, surveyed nine Bay Area counties and found that of those cities that charge fees, the cost ranges from \$3 in Mill Valley to \$1,074 in Union City.

Berkeley charges \$113. The city in September reduced the fee from \$260. In the fiscal year that ended in July, Berkeley issued 88 electrical solar permits for a total of \$9,983. That is up from three years ago when the city issued 64 permits for a total of \$6,326.

"We've done a lot of symbolic actions on reducing our fossil fuel consumption in the city, but what have we done that will really lead to real reductions?" Spring said.

Berkeley's Measure G on the Nov. 7 ballot asks voters if the city should have a goal of 80 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, a measure that speaks loudly of helping the environment, but really does nothing "concrete," Spring said.

Spring said she got the idea for the proposal when she paid the Berkeley fee herself after installing a \$10,000 solar hot water system on her home.

Gary Gerber, president of Sun Light & Power in Berkeley, which installs solar systems, said incentives such as free permits, the federal tax credit on solar systems and state rebates make a big difference in getting people to shell out for the systems. A residential solar system on a Berkeley home would cost in the range of \$30,000 to \$40,000 before the tax credits and rebates, said Gerber.

"It's about time," Gerber said of Spring's proposal. "That would be a great leadership role for Berkeley to take. These types of discounts are essential. It all factors into the decision process."

Gerber said the federal tax credit is \$2,000 for solar electricity or solar hot water systems and a homeowner can receive the credit for both. A state rebate program currently pays about \$10,000 for a typical solar electric project on a home.

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