

Forming a Collaborative Community Solar Planning Team



1. Get Organized

This fact sheet is part of the *Community Planning for Solar* toolkit designed to help Massachusetts municipalities and others proactively plan for solar development in their communities. For more information, please visit: <https://ag.umass.edu/solarplanning>

Note: Portions of this fact sheet are adapted from information in (1) National Institute of Standards and Technology Special Publication 1190-1, (May 2016), <https://nvlpubs.nist.gov/nistpubs/SpecialPublications/NIST.SP.1190v1.pdf> and (2) Local Mitigation Planning Handbook, FEMA (2013), <https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/fema-local-mitigation-planning-handbook-03-2013.pdf>.

In this first step in the *Community Planning for Solar* process, we provide guidance on forming a collaborative community Solar Planning Team and identifying initial roles, timelines, and goals.

Forming a Collaborative Community Solar Planning Team



Broad community engagement is essential to the success of a community solar planning process and implementation of a resulting *Community Solar Action Plan*. Successful community planning begins with a solar planning team that has support from municipal government, reflects the diversity of perspectives and backgrounds within the community, and includes the necessary expertise to carry out the steps of the planning process.

Municipal Support: The Solar Planning Committee

The most successful community solar planning efforts begin with support for the planning process from municipal government.

At the core of the Solar Planning Team should be an official, municipally designated Solar Planning Committee or (at a minimum) a municipal official. Because community solar planning is an on-going process, leadership by a dedicated Solar Planning Committee (or municipal official) is helpful to provide continuity, provide authority for convening stakeholders, and engage public support. Strong support and, where possible, participation by elected officials can help ensure that the planning process will have visibility, stakeholder participation, and ultimately provide support for implementation of recommended actions.

The Solar Planning Committee can be created according to the rules that typically govern creation of new committees within your city or town. For example, in many smaller municipalities, new committees are created either by a vote of Town Meeting or vote of the Select Board, with the composition of the committee determined by a Town Warrant article, or appointments made by vote of the Select Board. In larger communities, a vote of City Council or mayoral appointment may be required. Depending on local preferences, the Solar Planning Committee may be limited to community residents, or could include outside representatives with expertise in solar development, planning, and other relevant topic areas. In either case, subject matter experts or consultants from outside the community will likely need to be included as part of the overall Solar Planning Team to successfully carry out specific steps in the *Community Planning for Solar* process.

Community Stakeholders

Beyond the Solar Planning Committee, the larger Solar Planning Team will ideally include a broad range of community stakeholders. Important planning contributors include local champions who are highly connected and engaged with neighborhood, business, or community groups, as well as people who are actively engaged in other community-based activities such as social justice or activist organizations. They can advocate for support from and participation by other community stakeholders, and can help reach out to and develop an understanding with groups representing diverse views and experiences among people from diverse backgrounds and socioeconomic standing, within the community and with the public at large. They can be influential in rallying the community around the solar planning process. Developing knowledge in diverse groups creates local buy-in while also offering a more just and equitable solar planning process. Depending on your community's size, composition, and governance, appropriate perspectives might include:

- **Municipal officials and board members**, such as members of the Select Board, Planning Board, Conservation Commission, or Open Space & Recreation Committee
- **Municipal employees**, such as a Town Administrator, or employees involved in community development, public works, and building departments
- **Landowners**, including large private landowners and any public landowners with property in the community (e.g., a state forest or housing authority)
- **Local business owners**, including those involved in agriculture, construction, or development
- **Representatives of the community's social institutions** (e.g., community organizations, nongovernmental organizations, business/industry groups, health, education)
- **Owners and operators of important infrastructure** (e.g., large buildings, transportation systems, the local electricity utility)
- **Regional planning agency staff**
- **Other interested community groups**, stakeholders, and private residents

It is important to recognize that all community stakeholders may not have equal availability to participate on the Solar Planning Team. For example, parents of young children, caretakers for elderly relatives, or those working full-time or multiple jobs, may have less time to devote to civic activities than others. Nevertheless, it is helpful to include perspectives from all demographics on the planning committee. Consider opportunities to accommodate team members' availability into

the planning process by, for example, providing childcare, scheduling meetings at times that fit participants' schedules, or shifting roles so that team members with limited availability have the opportunity to weigh in on important decisions but aren't required to take on the bulk of day-to-day committee activities.

Areas of Expertise

The *Community Planning for Solar* process includes multiple steps and disciplines, from geospatial data analysis to financial planning to community engagement. The process can therefore benefit from a variety of fields of knowledge, which you may wish to represent on your Solar Planning Committee and/or overall Solar Planning Team. Areas of expertise might include knowledge and/or experience with:

- Solar PV or building engineering and construction
- Local governance practices and planning
- Project management and coordination
- Community organizing
- Leading and facilitating public meetings and workshops
- Financial analysis and economics
- Data management, data analysis, or geospatial data analysis
- Legal issues concerning state laws, regulations, and policies
- Conservation and environmental considerations

It is important to note that not all steps in the *Community Planning for Solar* process need to be carried out by the Solar Planning Team or Committee. Depending on funding availability and opportunities for support from local universities, community groups, or regional planning agencies, your community may have the capability to assign tasks to other members of the planning team or to outside groups. For example, the municipality could secure grant funds to engage a consultant to carry out the solar resource and infrastructure assessment described in Step 2: *Conduct a solar resource and infrastructure assessment* of the *Community Planning for Solar* toolkit. For Massachusetts municipalities, a good place to start is to check the Clean Energy Extension (CEE) website to see if UMass has support available to assist your community through the planning process.

Planning Team Goal-Setting and Tasks

Over the course of the *Community Planning for Solar* process, the Solar Planning Team will take on a wide variety and large number of tasks. At the outset of the planning process, the team should meet to discuss tasks, responsibilities, and timelines, to ensure all participants are comfortable with the process steps and their respective roles.

Initial Meetings

Before the first meeting, ask all participants to review the *Community Planning for Solar – Toolkit Overview*. During the first several meetings, team members should discuss the following:

- The Solar Planning Team membership structure and members – clarifying any distinctions between the Solar Planning Team, the Solar Planning Committee, and ancillary team members, such as consultants, regional planning agency staff, or other outside experts
- Team leadership and team member roles, assigning appropriate tasks based on availability and expertise
- Identification of additional expertise or community perspectives that should be included on the Solar Planning Team
- A plan for providing public notice of committee meetings, taking and approving minutes, and making minutes and other committee documents publicly available
- Establishing a regular meeting schedule
- Decision-making processes, particularly regarding potentially controversial issues
- Technical assistance needs, budget, potential sources of assistance and funding options
- Scoping decisions, including whether the Solar Planning Team intends to complete all steps of the planning process, how to fill gaps if not all steps are expected to be completed, and any additional steps outside of the *Community Planning for Solar* process that should be considered
- Interim and final project products and documents
- An approximate timeline for carrying out the steps of the planning process
- Community approval and adoption process for the *Community Solar Action Plan*
- A plan for regularly reviewing the goals, meeting schedule, timeline, and member roles, to assure the process is progressing and participants are comfortable with their respective responsibilities

We recommend using the associated spreadsheet planning tool (ag.umass.edu/solarplanning1) to lay out an initial project timeline and tasks assignments.

Further Reading

Additional resources related to best practices for establishing a community planning team:

- *FEMA Local Mitigation Planning Handbook (2013)*¹
- *Community Resilience Planning Guide for Buildings and Infrastructure Systems (2016)*²

While these resources address local mitigation and resilience planning, many of the principles and processes for forming collaborative teams are relevant to community solar planning.

¹ https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/fema-local-mitigation-planning-handbook_03-2013.pdf

² <https://nvlpubs.nist.gov/nistpubs/SpecialPublications/NIST.SP.1190v1.pdf>