



To: Mayor and City Council

From: Kelly Diekmann, Planning & Housing Director

Date: October 7, 2022

Subject: Request for a Text Amendment to Sec. 29.1309 – Solar Energy Systems

BACKGROUND:

Ryan Jeffrey, of 234 Partridge Avenue, contacted Mayor Haila and the Council Members regarding his desire to see changes to the Zoning Ordinance requirements for the installation of solar energy systems (solar panels). Mr. Jeffrey's letter states that he would like to see the process for reviewing a solar energy system permit simplified. He believes that the easiest way to simplify the review process is to "eliminate the zoning restrictions on solar". (See Attachment A for the text of Mr. Jeffrey's communication.)

The current regulations for solar energy systems were added to the Zoning Ordinance in 2009 (Ord. 4013) and most recently updated in 2015. The regulations pertain to solar panels on both residential and non-residential properties. They address roof mounted, free standing and wall mounted installations. Roof mounted is by far the most common type. The complete zoning standards can be found at this [link in Section 29.1309](#). **The primary purpose for these zoning regulations were to assure aesthetic compatibility between the solar installations and the architectural character of the neighborhood.**

Permitting includes the Ames Electric Department for interconnect agreements, planning/zoning review, and Inspections review of electrical and building permits. Internal coordination of permitting was updated administratively in 2017 as part of the SolSmart process. Note that due to multiple electric providers in the City, not all permits include Ames Electric with the review. Over the past 5 years, 57 solar energy permits have been approved by the Planning Division. So far this year 18 permits have been approved.

To staff's knowledge no one has been denied solar panels based upon zoning standards, however at times adjustments are made to comply with requirements. Staff also wants to emphasize that there is no restriction on placing roof mounted solar panels on the front of a house. In the past people have incorrectly stated Ames restricts solar panels on the roof of a house facing a street.

Mr. Jeffrey's email pertains to solar permits on residential properties, specifically homes, and does not mention solar panels on multifamily, commercial, and industrial property.

OPTIONS:

Mr. Jeffrey is requesting to have the City initiate a Text Amendment to remove zoning requirements for solar energy systems. His goal is to simplify the permit review process.

Option 1: Eliminate the Standards for Roof Mounted Solar Energy Systems

The intent is to eliminate the zoning standards for rooftop solar permits (which is the most common type of residential installation). This option would not make changes to wall-mounted systems or freestanding systems. This option would meet Mr. Jeffrey's interests.

Option 2: Eliminate the Standards for Solar Energy Systems on Single- and Two-Family Structure Properties (Yards, Roofs, and Walls).

The City Council could choose this option to eliminate zoning regulations for all solar energy systems on residential properties (single- and two-family). This option would likely meet Mr. Jeffrey's interest.

Option 3: Eliminate All Standards for Solar Energy Systems (Single- and Two-Family, Multifamily, Commercial, and Industrial Properties).

This option would eliminate Sec. 29.1309, including for non-residential properties (multifamily, commercial, and industrial). This would go beyond the scope of Mr. Jeffrey's request.

Option 4: Decline the Request

The City Council can decline to alter the existing zoning regulations related to solar energy systems. This action would result in no changes to the current regulations and administrative process.

STAFF COMMENTS:

As currently written, the code for solar energy systems is designed to regulate the installation of solar panels on all types of development. The residential regulations address free-standing (located in a yard), wall-mounted, and roof-mounted systems. Roof-mounted is by far the most popular type of residential installation. Mr. Jeffrey's request pertains to residential (single- and two-family) properties.

Due to the wide range of Options identified, staff believes it would be best to place this item on a future agenda for Council consideration. Alternatively, if City Council does not find these issues to be a priority at this time it would choose Option 4.

Attachment A – Letter to Council

Sept.2, 2022

To: Mayor Haila and Ames City Council

From: Ames Climate Action Team

While we continue the process of defining the full action list of our CAP, we can and should be tackling opportunities that we already understand will be part of the process. Dramatically increasing residential, integrated solar installations in Ames is one of these things, and we can take some simple steps to get this moving.

One immediately achievable action is to review and simplify our current solar permitting processes. Our four stage permitting system is needlessly complex. With requirements far in excess of any other home improvement project, it is needlessly daunting for citizens.

The simplest and most impactful way to improve this process is to eliminate the zoning restriction on solar. Peer cities such as Iowa City and Cedar Falls have no similar restrictions, and show no issues stemming from that. This zoning code needlessly extends the time it takes to get a permit for solar, restricts installations, and creates worry that a particular installation might not be allowed: all these are barriers to increasing alternative energy generation in our city.

Once the process is simplified, we can get to methods for actively encouraging installations. ACAT has already spoken with the J. Zook, our Ames Energy Service Coordinator, about working to produce a list of local installers, and exploring the option for hosting neighborhood “tupperware party” style informational events where an installer might provide discounts if multiple people in a neighborhood install solar at the same time.

All of this would require minimal staff time and could have a dramatic impact in encouraging solar deployment. In addition, it will leverage community engagement.

We ask that you rescind the zoning restrictions on domestic solar installations. We see no reason to wait.