



DECEMBER 2021

## Local policies to accelerate solar development

### BACKGROUND

In Illinois, state and utility policies have been a frustrating barrier to municipally hosted PV systems. Anxious to participate in the growing solar market enabled by state renewable energy legislation, municipalities found their niche in the SolSmart program. The program enables municipalities to exercise their unique authorities in guiding and regulating local development to accelerate private investment in residential and commercial solar.

#### Project description

The Metropolitan Mayors Caucus led its member Greenest Region Compact (GRC) communities to strategically streamline municipal codes and policies to make it faster, easier, and cheaper to adopt solar technology. The national SolSmart program created a checklist of priority actions for local governments to drive solar adoption, and it created a tiered SolSmart recognition program to celebrate successful communities. At the same time, GRC communities in the Chicago area were already committed to the consensus sustainability goals, including renewable energy goals of the GRC. When The Solar Foundation (now the Interstate Renewable Energy Council) sought pioneering municipalities to participate in the SolSmart program, GRC communities were eager to join. The Metropolitan Mayors Caucus formed cohorts of GRC communities to seek SolSmart designation.

#### Fast Facts

- **Population:** 8,524,670
- **GCoM member since:** 2020
- **Project name:** Earning SolSmart designation collaboratively
- **Project category:** Mitigation
- **Annual GHG saved:** 74 tons
- **Year implemented:** 2018
- **Cost:** \$240,000
- **Finance/funding:** Federal and State funding; Municipal revenues; Private ownership.



# SOLUTIONS IMPLEMENTED

## Implementation and finance

The SolSmart program was launched by The Solar Foundation, and the International City/County Management Association and is funded by the US Department of Energy Solar Technologies Office. With teams of experts and stakeholders, the Foundation developed an extensive checklist of strategic actions for local governments to reduce barriers to solar development. The Solar Foundation, which has since merged with Interstate Renewable Energy Council (IREC) works with other partners to provide technical assistance to all communities that pledged to take the steps and seek SolSmart designation. They also require accountability to assure high standards of compliance among all participating SolSmart communities; and they manage communications and recognition for all applicant communities.

Eager to connect to local governments across the country, The Solar Foundation recruited, funded, and trained partner organization as SolSmart Advisors to organize and support multiple municipalities.

The Metropolitan Mayors Caucus, a regional council of governments serving 275 municipalities in northeast Illinois, served as the contractual SolSmart Advisor for the many Greenest Region Compact (GRC) communities interested in accelerating solar development. Municipalities that chose to participate agreed to dedicate staff resources needed to streamline permitting and inspection process, gain and share knowledge, and communicate with constituents.

Working together, municipal leaders developed permitting processes to expedite rooftop PV permits in their own communities. The Mayors Caucus also organized hands-on solar PV training for building officials; developed template solar web pages for communities to use; and provided recommendations for making zoning codes solar-friendly.

There was no cost to municipalities to participate.



***“This collaborative SolSmart work is a powerful example of municipal leadership and regional collaboration leading to measurable sustainability impacts for residents and businesses alike.”***

# RESULTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

## Main Results

The strategic actions taken during the project earned the national SolSmart designation for 49 Illinois communities, more than any other state. Some participating communities saw as much as 6000% increase in the number of permitted solar installations resulting from their SolSmart designation.

## Key lessons

- ✓ Focusing on unique local authorities over construction and land use was effective.
- ✓ The SolSmart checklist guided municipalities to take the most influential steps, like favorable codes, staff training, permitting and inspection processes.
- ✓ Working in cohorts allowed shared learning and support.
- ✓ Standards across all SolSmart communities gave the solar industry confidence to invest in those communities.
- ✓ Public recognition and technical assistance were sufficient incentives for government action.



*"This project leveraged our strengths as local governments and proved we can be effective clean energy partners to support a thriving solar industry, serve our residents, and reduce emissions." (Quote from city staff)*

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Chicago Metropolitan Region for sharing this case study.

At GCoM we like to encourage our signatories to share their climate action. If you have any case studies or interesting project, please get in contact though email or other channels.

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