

Action Item 6.6

In February 2017 the Town of Bethel adopted a “Solar Law” which amended its zoning and tax code provisions to encourage and facilitate solar installations in our Town. The new law received praise from County Planning personnel, large scale solar installers and Town residents alike. Significantly, the Town determined to continue to provide the 15 year tax exemption from property tax increases due to solar installations, foregoing that tax income and permitting owners of solar installations to avoid increases in their taxes due to increases in property value. (See pages 10 and 17-18.) As a small, rural town with a limited year-round population, this was an important decision and, notably, stood in contrast to two neighboring towns which had already determined to “opt out” of the 15 year tax exemption.

To further encourage and incentivize solar installations, the new law permits roof-top, small ground installations and large ground installations in every one of our zoning districts, thereby eliminating the need and costs involved with securing a zoning variance from the Zoning Board of Appeals. Lastly, only large scale ground installations—those defined as installations in which the electricity produced is primarily for off-site sale or consumption—require a Special Use Permit from the Town Planning Board (pages 11-12). Small scale ground installations, defined as those ground installations producing electricity primarily for on-site consumption by residents, businesses and farms, will typically require only site plan review by the Town’s Code Enforcement Officer (see page 11). And all roof-top mounted systems need only comply with the permit application requirements of the Town’s unified solar permit or standard permit, as applicable (see page 10), keeping costs for roof-top installations (of whatever size) at a minimum.

We also added a provision (see 8 c on page 17) to allow the Planning Board, in its discretion, to eliminate certain requirements for large scale ground mounted solar installations where the installation would be compatible with other land use in the area and where given size, ownership model or other considerations the requirements may be considered unnecessary. This was to facilitate and reduce costs for community solar installations and distinguish community solar from other large scale installations for off-site consumption.

In these ways, the new solar law in the Town of Bethel aims to minimize the time, effort and costs incurred with planned solar installations, thereby encouraging increased reliance on renewable energy in our Town, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, enhancing our sustainability goals, and serving as a model for other Sullivan County towns which have not yet adopted solar laws.