

ENVIRONMENT

Vancouver ranks lowest for solar energy policies

City is reviewing fees related to residential photo-electric systems

GERRY BELLETT
VANCOUVER SUN

Vancouver wants to be known as the world's greenest city but, according to the Society Promoting Environmental Conservation, it is failing to encourage residents to turn to solar power.

A study of 17 western Canadian cities and communities finds Vancouver — which has set lofty renewable-energy targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions — has the worst ranking for solar energy policies, while Edmonton and Toronto score far better.

A breakdown of the total cost of installing a residential photo-electric system on the roof shows it would cost a Vancouver resident \$2,255 in fees and inspections, while the cost in Edmonton is only \$285 and in Toronto \$342.

Vancouver deputy city manager Sadhu Johnston said the city was reviewing the fee structure associated with solar power installations.

"I don't agree Vancouver is the least solar-friendly city. We were the first in Canada to mandate solar-ready buildings and put it in the building code," said Johnston.

"However, I agree we can do more to incentivize the installation of solar and a review of permit fees is underway."

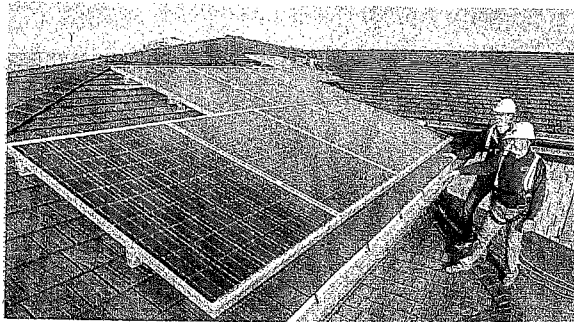
According to the study, Cawston, B.C., was found to be the cheapest, with residents paying only \$80 for an electrical permit.

The report says Vancouver charges \$600 for an electrical permit with \$60 being added for staff time. Then a \$225 building permit is needed, with \$120 in staff time added, then structural engineering costs of \$1,000, then a development permit, which could cost nothing or \$250.

Surrey was two places above Vancouver on the list with a total cost of \$1,860 in municipal fees.

"Vancouver's place at the bottom of the list is especially noteworthy given that the city has set target of moving to 100-per-cent renewable energy," said the study.

"Prior to 2014 Vancouver would have ranked number 10 when the cost was only \$620) but new policies moved it further down the list," said the report.



RIC ERNST/PNG FILES

A study by the Society Promoting Environmental Conservation suggests fees Vancouver charges related to the installation of residential solar panels don't reflect the city's green ambitions.

Western Canadian Solar Cities Ranking 2015

Cities ranked on the cost of municipal requirements for a 5 kW photovoltaic system (standard flush mount on a residential roof)

Rank	City	total
1	Cawston, BC	\$80
2	Keremeos, BC	\$144
3	Edmonton, AB	\$285
4	Toronto, ON	\$342
5	Calgary, AB	\$375
6	Regina, SK	\$450
7	Winnipeg, MN	\$560
8	Colwood, BC	\$602
9	Dawson Creek, BC	\$642
10	Van. (2005-'13)	\$620
11	Kelowna, BC	\$904
12	Osoyoos, BC	\$988
13	Penticton, BC	\$1,574
14	Ottawa, ON	\$1,620
15	Victoria, BC	\$1,642
16	Surrey, BC	\$1,860
17	Summerland, BC	\$2,113
18	Van. (current)	\$2,255

Johnston said it was misleading to compare fees in Vancouver with Toronto. He said Ontario is committed to reducing the reliance on coal-powered electricity plants and offers incentives to cities to encourage other forms of green energy, such as solar.

"Ninety-eight per cent of our electricity generation is carbon free because it comes from hydro. I'm not saying that as an excuse, but the issue is slightly more complicated than the study indicates."

SPEC member Robert Baxter admitted the study was

incomplete as researchers were unable to gather information on solar panel permitting fees from other major Canadian or B.C. cities.

"We did an online survey and we couldn't get information from some cities, for instance Montreal," said Baxter who works for Vancouver Renewable Energy, a company that installs solar panel systems.

He said Vancouver's high permit costs showed a disconnect between the city's green ambitions and how they can be achieved.

Baxter estimates there are about 25 residences in the city with solar panels on the roof.

The average system costs about \$20,000 and will produce 550 kilowatts of power, resulting in a savings of \$600 a year in electricity costs, he said.

Baxter said one of the reasons given by the city for requiring a structural engineering plan and a building permit was to ensure the solar panels were earthquake proof.

"They say they could be an earthquake danger, but other cities in earthquake zones such as Seattle and San Jose don't worry about it. All they ask for is an electrical permit," he said.

Johnston said the city has to ensure that solar panels would not be a danger from earthquakes or from being blown off the roof by wind, or endanger the roof by adding to the snow load.

"That's why we require a structural review," he said.