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Proposed State Solar Permitting Bill 'Unnecessary,' Beason Says

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Nevada County is joining other public agencies to oppose a state bill that would expedite permits for rooftop solar installations.

The opposition is not anti-solar, but against the bill's provisions and whether it is necessary.

"Nobody I know is against moving forward with alternative energy in California," said Nevada County Supervisor Chair Nate Beason. "We just don't need this bill to do it." Beason, chairman of the Rural County Representatives of California, said the proposal, Assembly Bill 2188, is not only unnecessary, but it raises safety concerns. If inspections and reviews on rooftop solar permits are fast-tracked, some roofs on older homes could be left unsafe for firefighters in the event of a fire.

Also, some older structures may not support the weight of a solar panel array, he said. Further, a mandate to fast-track solar permits could come at the expense of other important projects, especially in some small city or county building departments. "This bill creates more problems than it solves," Beason said. "We're moving ahead with solar space, without the bill."

Beason said he testified against the bill at an April 30 hearing of the state Assembly's local government committee in Sacramento.

After the bill's author, state Assemblyman Al Muratsuchi, D-Torrance, offered two amendments, the bill was referred to the Assembly appropriations committee, Beason said.

From there, it would go to the Assembly floor and then the state Senate.

Beason said he doesn't think the bill, which he characterizes as a elections ploy by Muratsuchi to buoy up the Southern California lawmaker's campaign in a tough re-election fight, has very good long-term prospects in the state Senate.

"This legislation has the potential to create unsafe conditions," said Justin Caporusso, RCRC spokesman. "Also, it places an excessive burden on local governments, all of whom are already dealing with a lack of resources and funding."

According to Caporusso, the bill as first proposed would have required cities and counties to issue a solar permit for small rooftop installations — under 10 kilowatts — in an "over-the-counter" process within 24 hours, and to inspect the solar installation within two days of the request.

In the amendments offered by Muratsuchi, the inspection time was extended to five days, and the permit approval process changed to “approved on receipt” if all the checklist requirements are met.

Beason said smaller cities’ and counties’ building departments could have a hard time adhering to those guidelines, even with the amendments. Even if they were able to process the permits, he did not think it was wise to rush them due to safety issues. Caporusso said Nevada County has moved ahead on solar without the bill.

“I’m told that Nevada City has one of the highest number of residential solar installations proportionate to population,” he said. “The county has been able to accomplish this without this legislation.”

Solar installations are also becoming popular on small business rooftops in Nevada County.

Auburn-based Flyers Energy has installed solar panels on the roofs of at least 24 of its stations in Northern California, including its two gas stations in Grass Valley.

“During peak production, we are not only self-sustaining but sell energy back to our utility company,” the Flyers Energy website says.

“Further, during peak consumption times in the summer months, our solar-powered stations do not contribute to the draw on the power grid.”

In addition to Rural County Representatives of California, other groups opposing the bill include the California State Association of Counties and the Urban Counties Caucus.

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