

City of Olympia Heritage Commission Guidelines

Solar Installations on Historic Properties

Introduction

Sensitive retrofitting of historic buildings ensures their continued use and optimal functioning, contributes to sustainability by preserving energy, and makes for happier historic homeowners.

To that end, the Olympia Heritage Commission encourages historic property owners to pursue energy-saving retrofits that achieve reasonable energy savings with the least intrusion or impact on the character of the building, including the use of use renewable energy sources such as solar power.

The installation of solar panels is an adaptive alteration that need not conflict with historic preservation. Recognizing that the characteristics of individual properties will vary greatly, the principles and guidelines presented here will be applied.

Proposals for solar installations on historic properties that meet the standards described here may be approved at the staff level. All other proposals will receive additional review by the City's Heritage Review Committee.

All solar panel installations should conform to the [Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation](#)* as required by Olympia Municipal Code [18.105.020](#) (see inset).

In the context of these standards, preservation review of solar installation will consider the following:

1. **Location.** Ideally, solar panels and related equipment will not be visible from a public street. Roof locations that are not visible from public streets, locations within the rear yard, or on secondary structures are preferred for solar arrays.
2. **Historic Features.** Historic features and materials should not be damaged or obscured, and installations should be fully reversible.
3. **Overall Impact.** The physical and visual impact of the installation should be subordinate to the design, proportions, and overall appearance of the home.

*The Applicable Standards are:

[Standard Two:](#) The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alterations of features that characterize a property shall be avoided.

[Standard Nine:](#) New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property.

[Standard Ten:](#) New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

Roof-top Installations

For most historic properties, locating solar panels on the primary facade is **the least desirable option** because it will have the greatest visual and physical effect on a property's character and that of the surrounding neighborhood or district. Other options that provide sufficient solar exposure as well as other home-energy conservation measures should be pursued first.

- Solar panels should be installed in locations not easily visible from the public right-of-way. If visible, solar panels should not be a dominant feature of the façade. Visual impact can be minimized in the following ways:
 - Use low-profile solar panels. Avoid use of solar systems in windows or on walls, siding, and shutters.
 - Install panels flat and do not alter the slope of the roof.
 - Whenever possible, position solar panels behind existing architectural features such as parapets, dormers and chimneys, or on flat surfaces.
 - Use solar panels and mounting systems that are compatible in color to established roof materials.
 - Flat roof structures should have solar panels set back from the roof edge with pitch and elevation adjusted to reduce visibility.
- Solar installations of any kind, including panels, shingles, laminates, glazing, or similar materials should not damage or replace original or historic materials.
- Installations must be fully reversible.
- Avoid locating associated equipment such as conduits, junction boxes and safety disconnect switch boxes on the primary building façade or other visible locations.
- For new construction in a historic district, solar panels should be integrated into the initial design to assure cohesion of design within the historic context.

Freestanding or Detached

- Freestanding or detached on-site solar panels should also be installed in locations that minimize visibility from the public right of way. Systems should be screened from view with materials seen elsewhere in the district such as fencing, or vegetation of suitable scale for the district and setting.
- Placement and design should not detract from the historic character of the site or destroy historic landscape materials.

Revised January 2022. It is anticipated that changing technologies will prompt periodic revision.