

Princeton Historic Preservation Commission

Guidelines – Installation of Solar Panels in Princeton Historic Districts

I. Introduction:

These Historic Preservation Commission (“HPC”) guidelines focus on the Secretary of the Interior’s recommended goals of no visibility or minimal visibility of solar equipment, no damage to historic roofing materials, and removability or reversibility of the installation. Under these guidelines for Princeton, an application that proposes a solar installation with no visibility, no damage to historic roof materials, and is reversible, will be approved with a “no significant impact” determination, whereas any installation with some visibility, risk of damage, or lack of reversibility will require more thorough review by the HPC.

II. Guidelines

A. Preservation Plan Applications Required; Informal Concept Review Encouraged

An owner of any historic site or structure, or structure located within a historic preservation district, who wishes to install solar panels or other solar energy system on his or her structure or property must submit a preservation plan application to the Princeton Historic Preservation Commission (“HPC”). *See* Princeton Municipal Code § 10B-380. As with all other preservation plan applications, the submission shall include documentation sufficient to demonstrate how the proposed installation will appear in context and from the public right of way, such as site plans, installation plans, photographs or drawings that convey the visibility (or lack thereof) of the proposed installation from the public right of way, and product specifications and/or samples.

Owners are strongly encouraged to secure informal concept review of the proposed installation by the HPC as early in the design of the project as possible, to minimize design fees for the applicant, facilitate discussion between the potential applicant and HPC at a public meeting

about the potential applicant's proposed work, and secure the HPC's comments early in the design process. *See* Princeton Municipal Code § 10B-383.

B. Guidelines for Approval of Solar Installations

Each preservation plan application proposing the installation of solar panels or other solar energy systems will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, following the HPC's usual procedures (*see* Princeton Municipal Code § 10B-380 through -381). In deciding whether to approve each such preservation plan, HPC will apply the following guidelines, which are derived from the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Illustrated Guidelines on Sustainability for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings, and related interpretive documents:

1. *Consider Other Approaches to Energy Efficiency*

- (a) The Secretary of the Interior recommends first implementing all appropriate treatments to improve the energy efficiency of a historic building before considering the installation of on-site solar technology. Other treatments may have greater life-cycle cost benefit than on-site solar devices.
- (b) Whether and the extent to which such alternative treatments have been considered and/or implemented will be a factor in HPC's decision.

2. *Investigate Alternate Locations for Solar Devices*

- (a) The Secretary of the Interior recommends considering and investigating alternate locations for solar devices, rather than installing a solar device on a historic building. There may be other compatible locations on the site, such as a rear yard, a non-historic building, or non-historic addition.

- (b) Solar collectors should be positioned in limited or no-visibility locations in secondary areas of the property. Vegetation or a compatible screen may be an option to further reduce the visual impact of these features on a historic property.
- (c) Whether and the extent to which such alternative locations for solar devices have been considered, investigated, and/or are feasible will be a factor in HPC's decision.
- 3. *Proposed Installations with No Visibility or Negative Impact will Receive Approval, While Installations with Some Visibility or Negative Impact Require Further Review***
- (a) If solar devices are to be installed on a historic building, the Secretary of the Interior recommends that they be installed in a manner that: (1) does not negatively impact the building's historic character; (2) does not damage historic roofing material; and (3) is reversible, meaning that the installation can later be removed without causing damage to historic roofing material. The HPC will evaluate preservation plans that propose installation of solar devices on historic buildings on the basis of how closely they adhere to these recommendations.
- (b) Zero visibility is most desirable to avoid negatively impacting the historic character of the building or district. Solar panels on historic buildings should not be visible from the public right of way such as nearby streets, sidewalks or other public spaces.
- (c) "Visibility" shall be determined as seen from the sidewalks and streets in the historic preservation district when viewed approximately six feet above street grade. Fences and free-standing walls are considered permanent, and objects hidden by them shall not be considered "visible."

- (d) The HPC Officer may issue a determination of “no significant impact,” as described in Princeton Municipal Code § 10B-380(2), where it appears certain, based on the preservation plan application and supporting materials, that the proposed installation of solar panels is: (a) not visible from any public right of way, (b) does not damage historic roofing material, and (c) is reversible.
- (e) Proposed installations that are, or may be, visible from a public right of way in a historic preservation district, even if only minimally; risk damage to historic roofing material; or are not reversible, will result in a “notice of significant impact” determination and will follow the Type 2 notice, inspection, hearing, decision, and appeal procedures set forth in Princeton Municipal Code § 10B-380(3)-(7).
- (f) Proposed installations with some level of visibility will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis by HPC, and may be approved via the procedures set forth in Princeton Municipal Code § 10B-380(3)-(7), provided they (a) achieve “visual compatibility,” meaning that the installation is designed and situated to have a minimal visual presence and to avoid having an adverse visual effect on the historic character of the building and the historic preservation district; (b) will not cause damage to or require removal of historic roofing material; and (c) are reversible.

III. HPC Research Materials

In preparing these guidelines, HPC gathered and relied upon the following materials, all of which are accessible online should you wish to review them further:

- *The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation & Illustrated Guidelines on Sustainability for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*, by the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Technical Preservation Services (2011), at pages 14-15, available at <https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards/rehabilitation/sustainability-guidelines.pdf>

- *Interpreting The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation: Incorporating Solar Panels in a Rehabilitation Project*, by the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Technical Preservation Services (August 2009), available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ce6e114ce7798000182c79f/t/5dbc6d0e4dc0062d0439c9a7/1572629775257/ITS52-SolarPanels.pdf>
- *Solar Panels on Historic Properties*, by the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service Technical Preservation Services, available at <https://www.nps.gov/tps/sustainability/new-technology/solar-on-historic.htm>
- *Sample Guidelines for Solar Systems in Historic Districts*, by the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions, available at <https://www.growsolar.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Sample-Guidelines-for-Solar-Systems-in-Historic-Districts.pdf>
- *Implementing Solar PV Projects on Historic Buildings and in Historic Districts*, by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (a national laboratory of the U.S. Department of Energy) (Sept. 2011), at pages 20-21, available at <https://www.nrel.gov/docs/fy11osti/51297.pdf>
- *Installing Solar Panels on Historic Buildings: A Survey of the Regulatory Environment*, by the U.S. Department of Energy SunShot Initiative in coordination with the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the North Carolina Solar Center (Aug. 2012), at pages 15-17, available at <https://icma.org/documents/installing-solar-panels-historic-buildings>
- *Solar Power and Historic Preservation*, by the Preservation League of New York State, available at <https://www.preservenys.org/solar-power>
- *Solar Panels*, by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/lpc/downloads/pdf/pubs/Solar%20Panels.pdf>
- *Solar Panel Installation Policy for Local Historic Districts*, by the City of St. Louis, Missouri (Dec. 2019), available at <https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/planning/cultural-resources/documents/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&pageid=330991>
- *Historic Design Guidelines*, by the Township of Montclair Historic Preservation Commissions (March 2016), available at https://www.montclairnjusa.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_5276204/File/Government/Departments/Planning%20&%20Community%20Development/Historic%20Preservation/Montclair%20Historic%20Design%20Guidelines.pdf
- *Frequently Presented Projects: Solar Panels*, by Glen Ridge Borough Historic Preservation Commission, available at <http://www.glenridgenj.org/hpc.htm#solarpanels>

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