

Long Island

Long Island solar power installers object to proposed building codes

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Proposed new building codes that the state says would help firefighters more safely respond to fires in homes with solar-energy panels would sharply crimp green-energy sales and production, even as the state says it wants more solar energy, local installers say.

New York's Department of State held a hearing in Hauppauge Tuesday seeking public comment in advance of adopting guidelines that would require a wider, 36-inch clearance around the outer perimeter of rooftop solar arrays, among other changes — double the current clearance.

Most Long Island municipalities follow a locally developed code that requires an 18-inch pathway around only a portion of panels. For example, if the back portion of the roof doesn't have panels, it wouldn't be required, installers said. They say the new rules are anti-solar.

"This is contrary to Gov. [Andrew M.] Cuomo's vision to solarize New York," said **Joe Milillo**, chairman of the Long Island Solar Energy Industries Association, a local industry group, adding the new code would cut rooftop space for solar power production by 40 percent to 70 percent.

Worse, said Milillo, former captain of the Nesconset Fire Department and owner of **Long Island Power Solutions in Islandia**, they won't improve safety. "If I believed the proposed setback requirements were necessary for firefighter safety, I would not be standing here," he said at Tuesday's meeting. "From a firefighting standpoint, they are overzealous and unnecessary."

Department of State spokesman Laz Benitez emphasized existing codes would remain in place until any new code is voted on and adopted. He defended the proposed changes.

While solar power systems are an "environmentally friendly way to mitigate the energy cost burden," he said, "the absence of provisions to mitigate the hazards associated with [the] systems creates a significant life-safety threat for firefighters requiring access to roofs" while "placing building occupants at risk."

The New York State Association of Fire Chiefs hasn't taken a stance on the new rules, but executive director Gerald DeLuca said, generally, "If there was additional room" around panels "it would make it a little easier for us."

Kevin MacLeod, owner of KPS Solar in Bay Shore, said the impact on installers wouldn't be so little. The codes would "severely restrict the amount of solar we can put on a house," he said. One recent job would see the number of panels he installed cut from 54 to 11. That would reduce the electric output to just 3,300 watts from the actual 16,200 watts, he said.