

Support SB79 (Favola)

Solar-ready roofs for certain gov't bldgs.; net-zero energy consumption bldg. design for schools.

SB79 ensures that making roofs solar-ready, “cool” or highly efficient becomes part of the planning process for new public buildings and those undergoing major renovation. For schools, SB79 goes a step further to ensure that wherever practicable, they are designed and constructed to meet net-zero energy standards.

Background

Solar panels on the roofs of public buildings save money for taxpayers by allowing public buildings to install solar at no upfront cost, and with long-term savings. Unfortunately, even today many buildings aren't built to hold the added weight of solar panels, or have too little roof space available for solar panels due to poor placement of vents and other roof obstructions.

Since 2013 the General Assembly has authorized certain electricity consumers, including local governments and schools, to install onsite solar using third-party power purchase agreements (PPAs). PPAs allow no-money-down financing that delivers cost savings from the start. The federal Inflation Reduction Act makes solar even more affordable, providing a 30% tax credit that can be further increased for projects in energy communities or serving low-income residents, and the credit is now refundable for tax-exempt entities. To date, more than 30 jurisdictions across Virginia have installed solar on public buildings or have projects in development.

Of all public buildings, schools have taken the most advantage of solar panels. With on-site solar and efficient design and construction, schools can achieve net-zero energy status, producing as much energy as they consume. These schools are healthier for students, leading to fewer student absences and higher academic achievement. In 2019, the General Assembly passed legislation (§ 22.1-141.1) calling for schools to be designed and built to be “energy positive.” Yet remarkably, even today some new schools are not designed for their roofs to accept the added weight of solar panels, and net-zero schools are still not standard.



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Current law requires new public buildings to meet high performance standards to save energy and taxpayer dollars while making the buildings healthier and more comfortable for occupants. The same standards apply to major renovations, where the cost exceeds 50 percent of the building's value. Section 15.2-1804.1 (for local governments) and § 2.2-1183 (for state agencies) also require that buildings incorporate resilience and distributed energy features, but they do not specify rooftop solar. SB79 adds the words "including a solar-ready roof" to this language, and defines solar-readiness according to best practices recommended by Virginia solar developers. Localities may exempt a building from these requirements if they are not cost-effective, but in that case they must still install a roof that meets a high efficiency standard.

For schools, SB79 goes further to require new schools and schools with major renovations to be designed and built to net-zero energy standards. A study conducted for Fairfax County Public Schools concluded that building a school to net zero added just 6 percent to construction costs, an amount that could be recovered in 10 years. Renovating an existing school to net-zero added 11 percent, which could be recovered in 15 years.^[1]

Every year, Virginia spends millions of dollars on new public schools and renovations. SB79 will ensure students, families and taxpayers get the greatest possible benefit from this spending.

^[1] <https://www.fcps.edu/sites/default/files/Net-Zero-Energy-Study.pdf>



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