



An Extended Guide · No. 1552

Permits, Zoning, and Property-Line Setbacks

The paperwork that
keeps it legal and safe

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! Read this first — two honest truths about ground-mount solar

Two honest truths before we start, because they surprise a lot of good folks. First, a ground-mounted solar array is a professional job. It takes a licensed installer, real foundation work in your yard, building and electrical permits, and your utility's approval to connect (that approval is called interconnection). This guide is here to help you understand, plan for, and evaluate a ground mount; it is not a do-it-yourself project, and I never want you digging footings, wiring an array, or opening an electrical panel. Second, a plain grid-tied solar system — roof or ground, without a battery — shuts itself off during a power outage, even in bright sunshine. That is a required safety feature, so the system cannot put electricity onto the lines while the crews are repairing them. If keeping the lights on during an outage matters to you, you will need a battery, and we will talk about that plainly. A ground array is a small structure in your yard, so it needs building and electrical permits and has to respect your local zoning rules — the paperwork that keeps it legal and safe.

The paperwork that keeps it legal and safe

Permits can sound like red tape, but they're really just the process that makes sure your array is built safely and sits where it's allowed. Let's walk through it calmly, in plain English.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County. The good news is that your installer handles nearly all of this — pulling the permits, knowing the local setbacks, and meeting the inspector. Your job is just to understand what's happening and to see that it's being done right.

I can't give you your township's exact rules in a guide, because they differ from one place to the next. What I can do is show you the pieces, so none of it catches you off guard.

★ Feeling buried in the paperwork?

Permits and zoning trip up a lot of good folks. Tell me where you live and what you're planning, and I'll help you understand what to expect — with nothing to sell you. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042.

The permits and zoning, in 60 seconds

If you read just one page, read this one.

- ❑ A ground array usually needs building and electrical permits.
- ❑ Zoning may require it to sit back a set distance from property lines.
- ❑ There can be limits on height, or rules on screening it from view.
- ❑ In town, an HOA may have its own rules; in the country, ag and floodplain.
- ❑ Your installer pulls the permits and knows your local rules.
- ❑ An inspector checks the finished work before it can be used.
- ❑ The rules vary by township — a good local installer already knows yours.

✓ Permits protect you, not just the town

A permitted, inspected install is your proof the work was done to code. That paperwork protects your safety, your insurance, and your home's value — it's worth having, not just required.

What a permit is, and why it protects you

Let's start with the plain idea behind the whole process.

A permit is simply your local government's permission to build something, granted after they've checked that the plan meets the safety codes. For solar, it means someone qualified has confirmed the foundation, the mounting, and the wiring are designed to be safe before a shovel goes in the ground — and then an inspector confirms it was actually built that way.

It isn't there to slow you down or nickel-and-dime you. It's there so that the array won't come loose in a storm, the wiring won't start a fire, and the whole thing is on record as done properly. That record matters if you ever sell the house or file an insurance claim.

✓ Unpermitted work can haunt a sale

Solar put in without permits can cause real headaches later — a stalled home sale, an insurance dispute, or a costly do-over. Doing it by the book the first time is far cheaper than fixing it after.

The two permits: building and electrical

Most ground-mount jobs involve two kinds of permit, each covering a different part of the work.

The building permit covers the structure — the foundation and the frame that hold the panels against wind and snow. The electrical permit covers the wiring, the disconnects, and the tie-in to your panel. Together they make sure both the thing standing in your yard and the power running through it are safe.

Depending on your area, these may be separate permits or rolled together, and there may be a zoning review as well. Your installer sorts out which apply and files them. You don't need to memorize the categories — just know that both the structure and the electrical side get their own sign-off.

✓ Two sides, both checked

Think of it as one review of what holds the array up, and another of what makes it safe to plug in. A complete job passes both.

Setbacks from your property lines

Here's the zoning rule that surprises folks most: your array often can't sit just anywhere on your land.

Most townships require structures — and a ground array usually counts as one — to sit back a certain distance from your property lines. That distance is called a setback, and it keeps buildings and equipment from crowding the boundary with your neighbors. It can differ for the front, the sides, and the back of your lot.

I won't print a setback number here, because there isn't one right answer — it depends entirely on your township's zoning. What matters is knowing the rule exists, so you don't set your heart on a spot right at the fence line before checking. Your installer or your local zoning office can tell you the exact figure for your property.

✓ Check setbacks before you pick the spot

Before you fall in love with a corner of the yard, have your installer confirm the setbacks. It's an easy thing to check early and a frustrating one to discover late.

Height limits and screening rules

Beyond where it sits, some places have a say in how tall your array stands and how visible it is.

Certain townships or neighborhoods limit how high a ground array can be, or ask that it be screened from the road with a fence, a hedge, or careful placement. This comes up more with taller pole mounts than with low racks, but it's worth asking about either way.

These rules are usually about keeping the neighborhood looking tidy, and they're rarely a real obstacle — but they can shape where and how the array goes in. A good installer folds them into the plan from the start rather than running into them at inspection.

✓ Ask about looks-based rules early

Height and screening rules are easy to design around when you know them up front. Bring them up on the first visit so the layout accounts for them.

If you're in a neighborhood with an association

In town and the suburbs, there may be one more layer on top of the township's rules: your homeowners association.

An HOA can have its own rules about solar — where it can go, how it must look, sometimes whether a ground array is allowed at all. These are separate from the government permits, and it's wise to check them before you get far into planning, so you're not surprised.

Rules on solar have been shifting in many places, so don't assume an old restriction still stands, and don't assume you're free and clear either. Read your association's current documents, or ask them directly, and get any approval in writing.

✓ Get HOA approval in writing

If you have an association, ask for their solar rules and their sign-off in writing before work begins. A friendly paper trail saves arguments later.

Floodplain and farm-ground rules in the country

Out on acreage, the paperwork leans a different direction — toward land use rather than neighbors.

If part of your property sits in a floodplain, there can be special rules about what's built there and how. And if your land is zoned or taxed as agricultural, there may be considerations about placing an array on it. Neither is usually a barrier, but both are worth checking before you commit to a spot.

The upside of country living is room to move: if one patch carries extra rules, another often doesn't. Your installer and the county can help you find a spot that's both sunny and simple to permit.

✓ Low, wet ground invites extra questions

If your best sun is in a low or flood-prone spot, ask about floodplain rules early. There's often a nearby patch that works just as well with less paperwork.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

The kinds of approvals you'll run into depend a lot on whether you're on a tidy town lot or out on open acreage.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or the suburbs, the rules cluster around neighbors and appearance: smaller lots make setbacks tighter, and an HOA may weigh in on how the array looks and where it goes.

- Tighter lots make property-line setbacks matter more.
- An HOA may have its own rules — check them before planning.
- Screening the array from the street may come up.
- Your installer knows the local zoning office and its people.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, the rules lean toward land use: agricultural zoning, floodplain along a creek, and larger setbacks, but usually far more room to find an easy, sunny spot.

- Ag zoning and floodplain rules can apply to parts of the land.
- There's usually plenty of room to meet setbacks comfortably.
- A far, sunny spot is easy to permit but may lengthen the trench.
- The county, not an HOA, is usually who you're dealing with.

★ Not sure which rules touch your place?

Town or country, the approvals differ, and it's easy to feel lost. Tell me your situation and I'll help you understand what likely applies — no charge to ask. Call (330) 200-8042.

The inspection: a good thing, not a hurdle

After the array is built, an inspector comes to confirm the work matches the approved plans and the code. Here's what that really means.

The inspector is on your side, whether it feels that way or not. They check that the foundation, the mounting, and the wiring were done the way the permit called for — that the array is anchored properly and the electrical work is safe. On some jobs they'll look at the trench while it's open, before it's covered.

Your installer schedules the inspection and is there for it. If anything needs adjusting, it gets fixed and re-checked. When it passes, you have an official record that your system was built right — which is exactly what you want.

✓ A passed inspection is money in the bank

That sign-off is proof for your insurer and any future buyer that the work was done to code. Far from a nuisance, it's one of the most valuable pieces of paper in the whole project.

Who handles the paperwork — and your part in it

Almost all of this falls to your installer. Your role is smaller, but it's not nothing.

A reputable installer pulls the permits, knows the local setbacks and rules, files the drawings, and meets the inspector. Handling all of that is part of what you're paying for, and an installer who tries to skip it is waving a red flag.

- The installer files the building and electrical permits.
- The installer knows — or looks up — your township's setbacks.
- You confirm the permits were actually pulled, and keep your copies.
- You mention any HOA or land-use wrinkle you know about.

! Beware anyone who wants to skip the permits

If an installer suggests doing the job without permits to save time or money, say no and walk away. Unpermitted electrical and structural work is unsafe, uninsurable, and a problem you'll inherit. Permits are not optional.

Permits are not the same as the utility hookup

This trips up a lot of folks, so let's be clear: there are two separate approvals, from two different places.

The permits we've been talking about come from your local building department — they're about building the array safely and legally on your land. Separately, your electric utility has to approve connecting the array to the grid. That second approval is called interconnection, and it's a whole process of its own.

You need both. Passing your building inspection does not mean you can switch the system on — the utility's approval comes after, on its own timeline. Our interconnection guide walks through that side in full, so the two don't get tangled in your mind.

✓ Two green lights, not one

Picture two traffic lights: one from the building department, one from the utility. Both must turn green before your solar goes live. This guide covers the first; the interconnection guide covers the second.

Never switch it on until it's approved

A finished-looking array is not the same as an approved one. This one's worth saying plainly.

Even after the panels are up and everything looks done, the system cannot legally or safely be energized until the inspection passes and the utility gives its approval to connect. Turning it on early can be dangerous, can violate the rules, and can jeopardize your coverage and your net-metering terms.

Your installer manages the sequence and will tell you when it's truly cleared to run. Until then, patience — the last stretch of waiting is normal, and it's protecting you.

! Approval comes before power

Please don't let anyone switch the system on before the inspection and the utility's approval are both done. It's a safety line, not a formality — for you and for the crews who work on the lines.

How long does all of this take?

The honest answer is the one you'll hear a lot in these guides: it varies — so let me tell you what it depends on.

Permit and inspection timelines depend on your local office and how busy they are, on how complete the paperwork is, and on whether anything needs adjusting. Some places move quickly; others take their time. Add the utility's separate timeline on top, and the whole path from signing to switch-on can stretch out.

None of that means anything is wrong — it's simply how a permitted project works. A good installer sets honest expectations up front and keeps you posted. If you plan for patience, the waiting won't rattle you.

✓ Ask for a realistic timeline

A trustworthy installer will give you an honest range for permits, inspection, and the utility — not a rosy promise. Steady and truthful beats fast and vague every time.

Keep your copies in a safe place

When the dust settles, you'll have a small stack of important papers. Hold onto them.

The permits, the approved plans, the inspection sign-off, and the utility's agreement are your proof that everything was done properly. You'll want them if you ever sell the house, file an insurance claim, or need service years down the road.

- Copies of the building and electrical permits.
- The approved plans and the final inspection sign-off.
- The utility's interconnection agreement.
- Your installer's warranty papers and contact information.

✓ One folder, one drawer

Tuck all of it into a single labeled folder with your other home papers. Future-you, or whoever buys the house, will be grateful it's all in one place.

The permit path, step by step

To pull it together, here's the usual order things happen in — so the process feels like a path, not a maze.

- Your installer designs the array and checks the local rules and setbacks.
- They file the building and electrical permits with your local office.
- Once approved, the crew builds the array to the permitted plans.
- An inspector checks the finished work — and the open trench, if needed.
- Separately, the utility approves connecting it (the interconnection step).

Every one of those steps is normal and expected. Knowing the order ahead of time turns a stack of unfamiliar words into a sequence you can follow and ask about.

If you hit a snag

Now and then a plan bumps into a rule. It's rarely the end of the road — here's how these things usually resolve.

Occasionally a preferred spot doesn't meet a setback, or a rule seems to stand in the way. Often the fix is simple: shift the array a little, choose a different patch, or adjust the design. If a genuine exception is needed, there's a formal process — a variance — to request one, and your installer can guide it.

The key is not to panic and not to try to sidestep the rule. Snags are common and workable, and a seasoned local installer has seen them all before. Patience and a good plan carry the day.

✓ A good installer has been here before

If you run into a zoning wrinkle, lean on your installer's experience. They'll know whether it's a quick adjustment or a variance — and how to handle either calmly.

Town rules and country rules, side by side

A quick look at how the paperwork tends to differ depending on where you live.

	In town	In the country
Main concern	Neighbors, looks	Land use
Setbacks	Tighter lot	More room
Extra layer	HOA rules	Floodplain, ag
You deal with	City or township	County or township
Who knows it	Local installer	Local installer

Wherever you are, the theme is the same: the rules exist, they vary, and a good local installer already knows them. Your job is to understand the shape of it, not to memorize the fine print.

Questions to ask your installer

Bring these to your first meeting so the paperwork holds no surprises.

Q: Which permits will this job need, and will you pull them?

You want a clear yes that they handle the building and electrical permits. An installer who hedges on permits is one to be wary of.

Q: What are the setbacks for a ground array on my property?

A local installer should know your township's setbacks, or look them up quickly. This tells you whether your preferred spot even works.

Q: Are there HOA, floodplain, or agricultural rules I should know about?

This surfaces the extra layers early — an HOA in town, or land-use rules in the country — while there's still time to plan around them.

✓ Local knowledge is the tell

The installer who rattles off your area's rules from memory is the one who's worked there for years. That familiarity is worth a great deal.

A few honest worries, eased

Here are the concerns I hear most about the paperwork, and why they're usually smaller than they seem.

'Permits are just a cash grab.'

They carry a fee, yes, but their real purpose is safety and a record that the work was done right. That record protects your insurance and your home's value — it earns its keep.

'What if I get denied?'

Outright denials are rare for a well-designed array. Far more often a small tweak — a different spot, a slight redesign — solves it. Your installer handles these bumps as a matter of routine.

✓ The paperwork is the boring part — let it be

Permits and zoning feel daunting mainly because they're unfamiliar. Hand them to a good installer, keep your copies, and they become the quiet, settled part of the project.

Common Questions

The questions folks ask me most about permits, zoning, and setbacks.

Q: Do I really need a permit for a ground-mounted array?

Almost certainly yes — building and electrical permits are standard for a ground mount, because it's a structure carrying electrical work. Your installer pulls them; skipping them is never worth the risk.

Q: How far from my property line does it have to sit?

That's a setback, and it's set by your township's zoning — I won't guess a number. Your installer or the local zoning office can tell you the exact distance for your lot.

Q: Is a permit the same as the utility connecting me?

No — they're two separate approvals. The permit is from your building department; connecting to the grid is the utility's own approval, called interconnection. You need both, and our interconnection guide covers the second.

Q: Can my HOA stop me from putting in a ground array?

An HOA can have rules about solar, though the ground rules have been changing in many places. Check your association's current documents early, and get any approval in writing before you begin.

★ Still tangled in the rules?

Permits and zoning are exactly the kind of thing I love to make plain. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and I'll help you understand what applies to your place — no charge to ask.

You don't have to do this alone

You just have to remember that a friendly, patient person is one call away.

I hope this guide made the permits, zoning, and setbacks for a ground array feel a little less daunting and a lot more doable. Keep it in a drawer with your other home papers, come back to a page whenever you need it, and don't worry about memorizing anything.

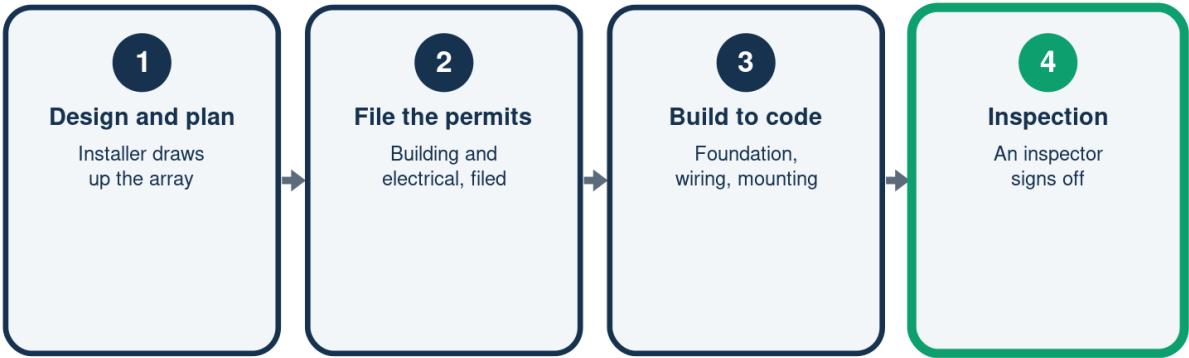
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The Permit Path

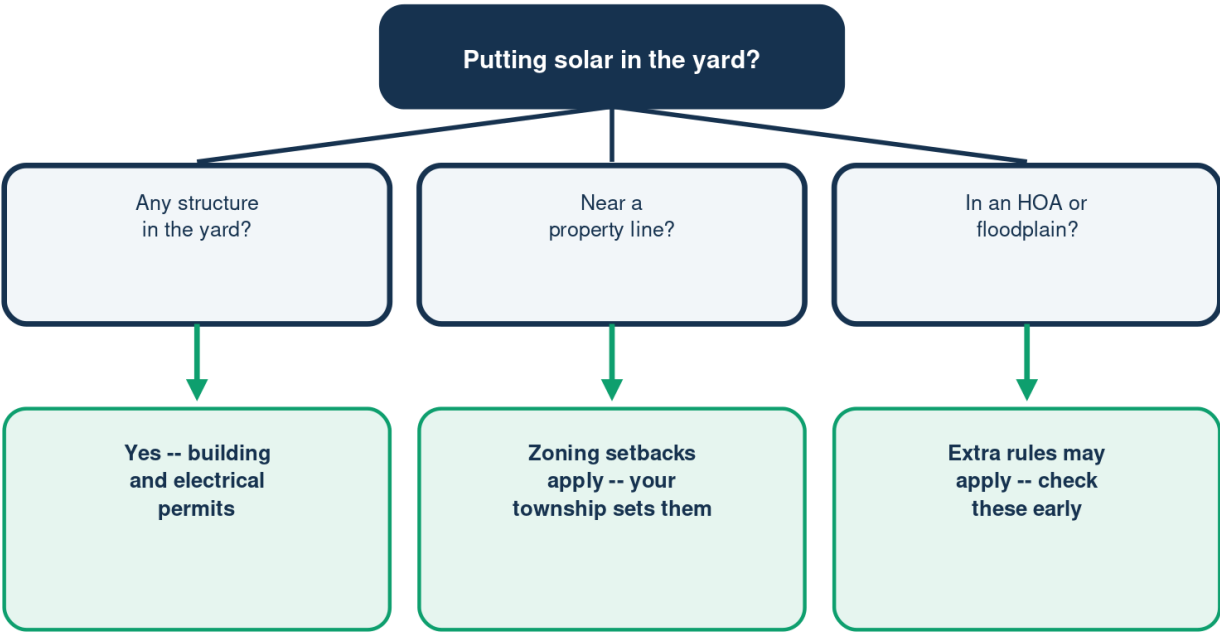
From first drawings to final sign-off



The utility hookup is a separate approval -- see the interconnection guide.

What Approvals Do I Need?

Most yards touch all three of these



Rules vary by township -- your installer and building department know yours.

Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.

Town Rules vs Country Rules

The paperwork leans different ways

	In town	In the country
Main concern	Neighbors	Land use
Setbacks	Tighter lot	More room
Extra layer	HOA rules	Floodplain, ag
You deal with	City hall	The county
Who knows it	Local pro	Local pro

Wherever you are, a good local installer already knows the rules.

Who Handles Each Part

Your job is to understand it, not to file it

	What it is	Who handles it
Permits	The paperwork	Installer
Building it	To code	Installer crew
Inspection	The sign-off	Local inspector
Your part	Understand it	You and Bill
Utility hookup	Separate OK	The utility

An installer who wants to skip the permits is one to walk away from.



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A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill.

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— *Bill*



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