

Mobile Food Units

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What does the City of Knoxville consider a Mobile Food Unit?

A: A Mobile Food Unit (“MFU”) is defined generally as follows:

1. an enclosed unit, truck, or trailer, or similar vehicle-mounted unit that is mobile or capable of being moved by a licensed motor vehicle;
2. that may or may not be independent with respect to water, waste water, and power utilities;
3. is used for the preparation, sale, or donation of On-site Prepared Food; and
4. is no larger than thirty-five (35) feet.

There are other types of vendors who sell food from mobile units; depending on how these vendors operate, they may be exempt from the MFU ordinance.

Q: Why does the City of Knoxville regulate Mobile Food Units?

A: After a pilot program, the City of Knoxville saw large growth in the MFU business. Currently, there are twenty-four MFUs operating as part of the pilot program. The pilot program provided the City with an invaluable opportunity to explore best practices and evaluate feedback before adopting a permanent ordinance. The MFU ordinance provides MFU owners, customers, and citizens with guidance and certainty on the safe and reasonable operation of MFUs.

Q: I’m interested in operating a MFU Unit in Knoxville. What’s the first step?

A: Before submitting an application to the City of Knoxville, all Mobile Food Units need to comply with the Food Service Establishment Rules and Regulations of the Tennessee Department of Health. If you reside in Knox County, please contact:

[Knox County Health Department](#)
Environmental Health Division
140 Dameron Avenue
Knoxville, TN 37917
(865) 215-5200
environmental@knoxcounty.org

If you do not reside in Knox County, please contact your local health department or health authority.

Q: Other than the health department and the City of Knoxville Office of Business support, what other agency do I need to contact?

A: You need to contact the Knoxville Utilities Board (KUB) to apply for a Grease Control Program Permit. Please call the KUB Grease Hotline at (865) 594-8337 to start the process. Based on the information you provide in the application, KUB will determine the size of the grease control equipment that you need. There will be some other requirements, such as regularly maintaining the equipment and posting a cleaning log of the grease control equipment according to a schedule set by KUB. You will also need to address with KUB your plans for disposal of the contents removed from the grease control equipment. More information is available at the KUB web page on [Grease Control Guide for Food Service Facilities](#), or by emailing KUB at GreaseControlProgram@kub.org.



Q: How do I apply for a Mobile Food Vending Permit?

A: Please download the [Mobile Food Unit Permit Application](#), complete it and send it along with any additional required information to:

Patricia Robledo
probledo@knoxvilletn.gov
400 Main Street
City & County Building #654D
(865) 215-3155

After the Office of Business Support receives the application and all required information, the Plans Reviews and Inspections Department will administer the Permit.

Q: How much does the City of Knoxville MFU Permit cost?

A: The initial MFU Permit Fee is \$200.00, and the Permit is valid for one year. The City of Knoxville also offers a Temporary Permit for a single event not to exceed three days, and the fee for this Temporary Permit is \$75.00. Permit fees cannot be pro-rated and are non-refundable once the Plans Review and Inspections Department issues the Permit.

Q: Do I need to get a MFU Permit for my ice cream truck?

A: It depends. An Ice Cream Vendor is not required to get a Permit so long as the Vendor is stationary in the same location for no more than fifteen (15) minutes at a time. More regulations, which can be found in the ordinance, also apply to this type of an Ice Cream Vendor. However, if an Ice Cream Vendor would like to park and operate for longer than 15 minutes in a designated Mobile Food Vending Zone, as part of a special event, or on private property, the Ice Cream Vendor will be required to comply with the MFU ordinance and receive a Permit.

Q: Will my MFU need to be inspected by the City of Knoxville?

A: Yes. All MFUs must be inspected prior to operation and the issuance of a Permit. In all instances, the MFU will have to be inspected by the Fire Marshal's Office and an Electric Inspector. Inspections are scheduled at the Coliseum at 9:00 am on the first and third Tuesday of every month. The Knoxville Fire Department and an electrical inspector will contact you to arrange your required inspections. After the MFU is permitted, the City reserves the right to conduct additional inspections to ensure compliance with the City's ordinances.

Q: What equipment does the City of Knoxville Fire Department require?

A: The Knoxville Fire Department requires all MFUs to be equipped with a 2-A:10-B:C fire extinguisher that is certified annually by a licensed company. Additionally, MFUs that produce grease laden vapors (e.g., those units with deep fat fryers or flat top griddles) must be equipped with a K-Class fire extinguisher that is certified annually by a licensed company, and must have a hood suppression system. For more information about these requirements, please see the [Mobile Food Unit Permit Application](#).

Q: What additional information will the City of Knoxville need before issuing a permit?

A: In addition to a completed City of Knoxville Mobile Food Unit Permit Application, you will need to provide the following:

- The permit fee, by cash, credit card, or check payable to the City of Knoxville
- Copy of Tennessee Department of Health License



- Knoxville Utilities Board Grease Control Program Permit Number
- Copy of City and County business license(s)
- Copy of a valid government-issued driver's license for all drivers
- Proof of Commercial, Automobile, and Workers' Compensation Insurance, if applicable
- Executed Indemnity Agreement
- A color photo of the MFU

Q: What type of business licenses do I need?

A: If your business is within Knoxville city limits, you need a [City of Knoxville business license](#) and a [Knox County business license](#). If your business is outside Knox County, you need to check the requirements in your jurisdiction.

Q: What permits must be displayed in my Mobile Food Unit?

A: You must visibly display the Health Department License and the City of Knoxville MFU Permit. Additionally, if you are required to have a Site Permit, you must also display it. Finally, if you are operating on private property, you are not required to display the letter of permission, but you should have it on hand.

Q: Can I operate my Mobile Food Unit in City streets?

A: You may only operate in the City streets in Mobile Food Vending Zones during the times permitted. You must reserve your use of Zones through the City of Knoxville. Operating a MFU on City streets or rights-of-way outside of the Mobile Food Vending Zones or outside of a special event is illegal.

Q: Where can I operate my Mobile Food Unit other than in the designated Mobile Food Vending Zones?

A: With certain restrictions, mobile vending on private property is permitted in Commercial, Industrial, Office, Open Space, and Form Based Code Districts as defined in the City of Knoxville Zoning Code. Additionally, MFUs may operate in Residential Districts under specific circumstances; see the ordinance for more detail. If you are parking your Unit on private property outside of the designated (i.e., striped) parking spaces, a Site Permit is required. If your Unit is using shore power on private property, the electrical hook-up must be inspected and approved by the Plans Review and Inspections Department.

Q: I am the owner or operator of a private property and would like to invite a Mobile Food Units onto my property. What do I need to do?

A: Mobile Vending on private property is only permitted in specific districts (see previous question and answer). If the Units will be operating on your property in designated (i.e., striped) parking spaces **and** using onboard generators, you don't need to do anything extra. However, if the Units will be operating outside of designated parking spaces or using shore power, additional approvals will be required. If the Units are outside of the designated parking spaces, a Site Permit is required to ensure that the placement of the MFU allows fire access, does not impede visibility of motorists, and is otherwise situated safely. If the Units are using shore power on your property, the electrical hook-up must be inspected and approved by the Plans Review and Inspections Department. Please note that MFUs are not permitted to operate on unpaved, gravel lots.

Q: How can I set up my Mobile Food Unit at Special Events?

A: You need to contact the person in charge of the special event to be a vendor, and you will need a Permit. The City of Knoxville offers a Temporary Permit for MFUs that may be used for a single event not to exceed three consecutive days. It is crucial for you to contact the Office of Business Support in advance of the event to ensure that your Unit can comply with City regulations. For information about special events in the City, including a calendar of events, visit the [Special Events website](#).



Q: Can I operate my Mobile Food Unit in a City of Knoxville park?

A: Yes, but you may only operate in certain parks and you must make a reservation through the Parks and Recreation Department. If you wish to operate your Mobile Food Unit in a City of Knoxville park, please refer to the [Rules for MFU Operation in City Parks](#) and contact the Parks and Recreation Department at (865) 215-2091.

Q: Can I use signs to advertise my business?

A: Yes, a MFU is limited to signs mounted to the exterior of the mobile food establishment and one (1) sandwich board sign with dimensions no larger than twenty-five inches by forty-five inches (25" x 45"). All signs mounted on the Unit shall be secured and mounted flat against the Unit and shall not project more than six inches (6") from the exterior of the Unit. Sandwich board signs shall not obstruct or impede pedestrian or vehicular traffic. You may not use flashing lights to draw attention to your MFU.

Q: May I use amplification equipment on or around my Unit?

A: No.

Q: May I operate my Mobile Food business from my house?

A: No. Specific districts govern any activity or use associated with operating a MFU (e.g., food preparation, waste disposal, produce deliveries). Residential districts strictly limit the operation of home occupations, as defined in [Article V, Section 12](#) of the City of Knoxville Zoning Ordinance.

Q: Where can I access all the rules that apply to Mobile Food Units?

A: In the [MFU ordinance](#), you can find detailed information including definitions, permitting process, zones, indemnity, insurance requirements, and much more.

Q: Why are there so many regulations?

A: It may seem like there are a lot of rules for Mobile Food Units; however, most of these rules—such as the stormwater regulations, electrical inspections, and zoning restrictions—already exist in the City of Knoxville's ordinances. The laws relevant to MFUs have simply been compiled into one ordinance for convenience. Most importantly, though, the City of Knoxville wants to keep its citizens safe and the City of Knoxville wants everyone to have a clear understanding of how MFUs may operate.

Q: Who should I contact if I have further questions?

A: While the Mobile Food Unit initiative is a joint effort of numerous City departments, the program is administered by the Office of Business Support. If you have questions, please contact Patricia Robledo, Business Liaison, at (865) 215-3155 or probledo@knoxvilletn.gov.