

Streamlining Food Business Permitting

June 30, 2025



King County

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I. Proviso Text

P1 PROVIDED THAT:

Of this appropriation, \$100,000 shall not be expended or encumbered until the executive transmits a report on streamlining and otherwise improving the food business permitting process to reduce barriers for small food businesses seeking permits, and a motion that should acknowledge receipt of the report, and a motion acknowledging receipt of the report is passed by the council. The motion should reference the subject matter, the proviso's ordinance, ordinance section, and proviso number in both the title and body of the motion.

The report shall include, but not be limited to:

- A. Description of current food business permitting processes;
- B. Data on current food business permitting timelines;
- C. Options for streamlining and otherwise improving the food business permitting process to reduce barriers for small food businesses seeking permits, including resources necessary for or barriers to implementing each option;
- D. A recommendation on whether to implement each option required in subsection C. of this proviso;
- E. A workplan, including, but not limited to, a timeline of key milestones for implementing each option recommended in accordance with subsection D. of this proviso.

The executive should electronically file the report and a motion required by this proviso by July 1, 2025, with the clerk of the council, who shall retain an electronic copy and provide an electronic copy to all councilmembers, the council chief of staff, and the lead staff for the health and human services committee or its successor.

Cite in the following format:

Ordinance 19861, Section 104, Public Health, P71¹

¹ Ordinance 19861 [\[LINK\]](#), Section 104, Public Health, P71

II. Executive Summary

This report is provided in response to Ordinance 19861 which included a Proviso calling for a report on streamlining and otherwise improving the food business permitting process to reduce barriers for small food businesses seeking permits, and a proposed Motion that would acknowledge receipt of the report.

Washington State Retail Food Code as adopted in the King County Board of Health (BOH) Title 5² requires that all foods sold to the public be stored and prepared in approved commercial kitchens and permitted by the Public Health – Seattle & King County’s Food Safety Program. The Food Safety Program is responsible for the safety of all retail foods sold in King County.

The core mission of the Food Safety Program is to prevent and reduce the risk of foodborne illnesses to King County residents and those that visit the county. The Food Safety Program prioritizes education and outreach over enforcement because the program understands enforcement alone won’t address the challenges and needs of food vendors who operate without a permit.

In recent years, the number of vendors selling foods to the public without permits, commonly called unpermitted food vendors, has significantly increased locally;³ similar trends have been reported in other jurisdictions, including Oregon and California.⁴ Based on input the Food Safety Program has gathered through its outreach and engagement efforts (including through stakeholder engagement, surveys, information sessions, and inspections), the majority of street food vendors would like to operate their business in compliance with the Retail Food Code but lack either the knowledge or the resources, or both, to do so. However, certain unpermitted street food vendors continue to operate despite repeated engagement with Food Safety Program staff.

This report describes current food business permitting processes. The Food Safety Program issues three types of permits:⁵ (1) Permanent food permits for businesses that retail out of brick-and-mortar places. Examples include, restaurants, coffee shops, grocery stores, school cafeterias, and caterers. (2) Permanent food permits for mobile food units that retail out of a food truck or a cart. Examples include food trucks, hot dog carts, and espresso carts. (3) Temporary food permits including Farmers Markets that retail out of a temporary setup for a short duration. Examples include Bite of Seattle and festivals around the county.

The food permitting process begins with the food establishment plan review, which is required for all food services operations before opening day. Plan review ensures that establishments are built or

² King County Board of Health, editor. “Title 5: Food Establishments.” *King County Food Code*, 14 Mar. 2025, <https://cdn.kingcounty.gov/-/media/king-county/depts/dph/documents/about-public-health/board-of-health/boh-code-title-5.pdf?rev=2522a74f7a0146c89772fc260119c285&hash=737DBC3D411DDA1128DDD12FD9E66430>.

³ Vinh, T. “King County food permit violations surged in 2024. We checked the data.” *Seattle Times*. 25 Mar. 2025, <https://www.seattletimes.com/life/food-drink/king-county-food-permit-violations-surged-in-2024-we-checked-the-data/>.

⁴ Multnomah County. “Health Department urges public to avoid purchasing food from unlicensed food carts or street vendors.” 15 Aug. 2024. <https://multco.us/news/health-department-urges-public-avoid-purchasing-food-unlicensed-food-carts-or-street-vendors>

renovated in ways that promote food safety and prevent code violations by addressing potential layout and design issues prior to construction or renovation. For mobile food unit operators, vendors at farmers markets or temporary events, and caterers, plan review requires that these businesses identify a commercial kitchen where they can store and process food. In King County, there are about 30 large commercial kitchens that offer kitchen access to multiple food vendors. The demand for access to commercial kitchens far exceeds the availability of these facilities.

This report also provides data on current food business permitting timelines. The Food Safety Program received more food establishment plan applications in 2024 than in the years leading up to the pandemic (943 plans received in 2024; 920 plans received in 2019). The Food Safety Program Plan Review Team has been steadily improving responsive times for plans submitted by new and remodeled restaurants and mobile food units. As of the end of February 2025, the plan review response time was 20 days. The Food Safety Program’s goal is to maintain a response time under 21 days.

Lastly, the Food Safety Program recognizes that additional work is needed to lower permitting barriers for vendors. The key barriers in the food permitting process include knowledge gaps, limited access to commissary kitchens, limited permitting options, uniform permitting requirements, and financial challenges.

The following table is a summary of actions identified by the Food Safety Program that could further streamline and improve the food business permitting process to reduce barriers for small food businesses seeking permits and timeline of key milestones to achieve each action:

Action	Duration	Cost (Source of funding)	Implementation planning and timeline
Action #1: Address knowledge gaps by contracting with community-based organizations (CBO) to conduct outreach to unpermitted street food vendors, to encourage them to apply for a permit and provide them with support in submitting an application.	One Year	\$150K (Revenue from Food Handler Card)	RFP issued on 2/5/2, contracts established, and work commenced 5/1/2025; will offer for a year
Action #2: Reduce financial barriers by offering a one-time 50 percent reduced fee for new street food vendors with carts for their first year. The reduced fee includes 50 percent off plan review and annual permit fees for new street food vendors.	One Year	\$49,000-\$55,000 (Revenue from Food Handler Card)	Q3-Q4 2025
Action #3: Expand access to commissary kitchens by offering a six-month pilot for commercial	One Year	\$210,000-\$270,000 (Revenue from Food Handler Card)	Q2-Q4 2025

Action	Duration	Cost (Source of funding)	Implementation planning and timeline
kitchen vouchers to support new and unpermitted street food vendors.			
Action #4: Expand permitting options by piloting seasonal permitting for “pop-up” vendors (currently booths/stands are only allowed as part of temporary events/farmers markets).	One Year	Not applicable – covered by permit fees	Q3-Q4 2025
Action #5: Reduce financial barriers by offering a modified plan review for vendors using a pre-approved cart design for specific low-risk menu items.	Continuous	Not applicable – covered by Plan review fee	Q1 2026-Q2, 2026

III. Background

Department Overview: Public Health — Seattle & King County (PHSKC) works to protect and improve the health and well-being of all people in King County. Public Health is one of the largest metropolitan health departments in the United States, with approximately 1,600 employees. The department serves the 2.3 million people of King County, who reside in urban, rural, shoreline, foothill, and mountain communities.⁶

The PHSKC Environmental Health Services Division’s Food Safety Program (program) is responsible for the safety of all retail foods sold in King County. The program permits, inspects, and provides technical support to retail food establishments. The program permits about 12,500 permanent food establishments including restaurants, coffee shops, mobile food units, bakeries shops, school cafeterias, and catering operations. In addition, the program permits and inspects more than 3,000 temporary events including 50 farmers markets across King County. The program conducts more than 20,000 routine inspections, issues more than 50,000 food worker cards,⁷ and responds to more than 1,000 complaints annually. The Food Safety Program investigates foodborne illness complaints and outbreaks. The Food Safety Program has 65 diverse, multidisciplinary, and multilingual (16+ languages) staff who provide oversight of the dynamic and multicultural food cuisines in King County.

Key Historical Conditions: Washington State Retail Food Code as adopted in the KC Board of Health (BOH) Title 5,⁸ requires that all foods sold to the public be stored and prepared in approved commercial

⁶ Public Health - Seattle & King County, 2024-2029 Strategic Plan, kingcounty.gov/health/strategicplan Accessed: April 2025

⁷ <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dph/certificates-permits-licenses/food-worker-cards>

⁸ King County Board of Health, editor. “Title 5: Food Establishments.” *King County Food Code*, 14 Mar. 2025, <https://cdn.kingcounty.gov/-/media/king-county/depts/dph/documents/about-public-health/board-of->

kitchens and evaluated and permitted by Public Health – Seattle & King County. The Retail Food Code also requires that food establishments receive regular inspections.

In recent years, the number of vendors selling foods to the public without permits, commonly called unpermitted food vendors, has significantly increased locally;⁹ similar trends have been reported in other jurisdictions, including Oregon and California.¹⁰ Locally, based on health inspectors' encounters and complaints submitted to the Food Safety Program, unpermitted vendors routinely operate at large public events. Based on an internal analysis of complaints submitted to the Food Safety Program, areas of King County where complaints have been most common include Seattle (Alki Beach, Capitol Hill, the stadium area, Pike Place Market, at the waterfront) and at various street corners and parking lots in other cities, including Federal Way, Burien, SeaTac, Kent, and Auburn. In addition, anecdotally, there has been an increase in the sale of foods prepared in residential kitchens directly to customers without the benefit of Public Health permitting and inspection, with the growth of online marketplaces and the ease of setting up an online store.

In 2024, the Food Safety Program received over 77 complaints related to unpermitted street food vending from the public and businesses and closed the operation of 109 street food vendors. These figures represented a substantial increase relative to 2023 (27 closures and 41 complaints). The majority of these vendors were "pop-ups" in the form of tables, tents, and booths that were either selling food cooked or reheated on site (e.g., hot dogs) or cut fruit prepared elsewhere. In addition to complaints from the public about food safety, permitted food vendors routinely express concerns that unpermitted food vendors are unfairly competing with them or are putting the reputation of street foods at risk due to their lack of permitting and oversight. Multiple media outlets have reported on issues related to unpermitted vendors, including about the growing number of unpermitted street food operations,¹¹ tensions between permitted and unpermitted food vendors,¹² and concerns about food and public safety.¹³

Key Current Conditions: Based on input the Food Safety Program has gathered through its outreach and engagement efforts (including through stakeholder engagement, surveys, information sessions, and

[health/boh-code-title-5.pdf?rev=2522a74f7a0146c89772fc260119c285&hash=737DBC3D411DDA1128DDD12FD9E66430](#).

⁹ Vinh, T. "King County food permit violations surged in 2024. We checked the data." *Seattle Times*. 25 Mar. 2025, <https://www.seattletimes.com/life/food-drink/king-county-food-permit-violations-surged-in-2024-we-checked-the-data/>.

¹⁰ Multnomah County. "Health Department urges public to avoid purchasing food from unlicensed food carts or street vendors." 15 Aug. 2024. <https://multco.us/news/health-department-urges-public-avoid-purchasing-food-unlicensed-food-carts-or-street-vendors>

¹¹ Varriano, J. & Vinh, T. "Unpermitted food vendor violations have exploded in Seattle in 2024." *Seattle Times*. 9 Nov. 2024, https://www.seattletimes.com/life/food-drink/unpermitted-food-vendor-violations-have-exploded-in-seattle-in-2024/?utm_source=referral&utm_medium=mobile-app&utm_campaign=ios.

¹² Varriano, J. & Vinh, T. "Unpermitted food vendor violations have exploded in Seattle in 2024." *Seattle Times*. 9 Nov. 2024, https://www.seattletimes.com/life/food-drink/unpermitted-food-vendor-violations-have-exploded-in-seattle-in-2024/?utm_source=referral&utm_medium=mobile-app&utm_campaign=ios.

¹³ "Monster Dogs is legit, but county has begun crackdown on Pike/Pine 'unpermitted mobile food vendors.'" *Capitol Hill Seattle Blog*. 11 December 2024. https://www.capitolhillseattle.com/2024/12/monster-dogs-is-legit-but-county-has-begun-crackdown-on-pike-pine-unpermitted-mobile-food-vendors/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=bluesky

inspections), the majority of street food vendors would like to operate their business in compliance with the Retail Food Code but lack either the knowledge or the resources, or both, to do so. Key barriers to obtaining permits identified for businesses include:

- **Financial challenges:** The cost of operating a mobile food sales unit includes much more than obtaining a food permit (See Appendix A). From conversations with vendors and commercial kitchen owners, the Food Safety Program learned that vendors anticipate these costs related to a mobile food sales unit: cost of purchasing a cart: \$5,000-\$10,000; commercial kitchen rental: \$800-\$1,200/per month; Public Health one-time plan review: \$972; Public Health operational annual permit: \$1,000; state/city business permits: \$400; city street use permit: \$400-\$800. While the cost of obtaining Food Safety Program plan review and permits is only a small fraction of the total cost of starting a food business, these costs can be a barrier, particularly for vendors who do not anticipate profit margins to justify a mobile food truck.
- **Knowledge gaps:** The permitting process requires vendors to navigate information across multiple agencies' permitting and licensing requirements. Some vendors would like to comply with these requirements but have difficulty understanding what to do to meet each requirement.
- **Limited access to commercial kitchens:** Commercial kitchen access is an expense that smaller business owners may struggle to afford, particularly for vendors whose profit margins might not be sufficiently high to offset commercial rental fees. Furthermore, there aren't enough commercial kitchens to meet the demand.
- **Restricted permitting under the Retail Food Code:** The Retail Food Code does not provide permitting options for certain types of food businesses. For example, the code does not allow "pop-up" food vending, unless the vendor is associated with a temporary event or farmer's market. In addition, all mobile units must satisfy the same mobile plan review requirements regardless of the type of food served.

The Food Safety Program trains its inspectors to educate unpermitted vendors on how to obtain a food permit. When closing unpermitted street food vending operations, inspectors provide written materials in English and Spanish, offer language support through interpretation services, and offer to meet by phone or in person to help vendors with the permitting process. While these strategies have been successful at getting some vendors to obtain a food permit, certain unpermitted street food vendors continue to operate despite repeated. For example, the Food Safety Program often finds unpermitted street food vendors selling foods out of makeshift carts near stadiums, Climate Pledge Arena, Capitol Hill, and outside concert halls. Similar vendors have been seen operating in defiance of food safety requirements in other counties and states (e.g., Oregon, California).¹⁴ These street food vendors lack equipment designed for safe food handling; they do not have handwashing equipment and cannot hold foods at a safe temperature. The Food Safety Program has not been able to obtain the contact information of the cart owners from the vendors that operate them. The vendors typically evade efforts to engage them in a conversation about permitting (e.g., by walking away), and some vendors have gotten into physical altercations with health inspectors as well as other regulatory agencies. While the Food Safety Program continues to provide as much support and education as possible to these food vendors, the Program takes regulatory enforcement actions to protect the public from food safety risks.

¹⁴ Multnomah County. "Health Department urges public to avoid purchasing food from unlicensed food carts or street vendors." 15 Aug. 2024. <https://multco.us/news/health-department-urges-public-avoid-purchasing-food-unlicensed-food-carts-or-street-vendors>

However, given that many unpermitted operations reopen for business as soon as an inspector walks away, it is not possible for staff to ensure compliance at all times.

The Food Safety Program is fully funded through a fee-for-service model. As unpermitted vendors do not pay permit fees, all the time and resources spent on providing guidance and conducting regulatory enforcement of unpermitted vending is funded by fees paid by permitted businesses. These activities put a strain on the program's budget and staff time for conducting routine inspections and educational visits for permitted establishments.

Report Methodology:

To assemble this report, Food Safety Program staff used information gathered from the following outreach and engagement opportunities:

- **Quarterly business community meetings** hosted by the Food Safety Program, to which all 12,500 permitted food establishments are invited. An additional meeting is held with owners of mobile food units. This meeting is held in both English and Spanish.
- **Quarterly newsletters**¹⁵ distributed to more than 14,000 subscribers, whereby the Food Safety Program not only provides food safety news and updates but also solicits readers to engage with the program by submitting comments or questions. Staff review and respond to all submitted messages.
- **Surveys** deployed to all permitted food establishments in King County (more than 13,000 recipients). In 2024/25, the Food Safety Program deployed surveys to gather information about: (1) The food safety rating expansion (2) establishing a stakeholder meeting for mobile food units aimed at fostering knowledge sharing within the community of mobile businesses (3) challenges/successes business owners experienced when obtaining a food permit.
- **Community information sessions** hosted by the Food Safety Program, aimed at supporting new food vendors in navigating the permitting process. The first session was held on 11/19/2024 at the Rainier Beach Library in Seattle and the second and third sessions were held on 2/3/2025 and 3/27/25 at El Centro de la Raza also in Seattle. Food Safety Program staff provided one-on-one guidance in English or Spanish about the permitting process. The Program's partners, including Growing Contigo, Lake City Collective, and El Centro de la Raza, also had staff available to answer broader business development questions from new food vendors.
- **Feedback from operators to food inspectors** during inspections; inspectors take advantage of opportunities to share and discuss suggestions for improvement with their team leads, supervisors, and the program director on a regular basis.
- **Regular meetings with business advocacy groups:**
 - The Washington Hospitality Association,¹⁶ the state's hospitality trade group, representing more than 6,000 members of the hotel, restaurant, and hospitality industry.
 - The Washington Food Truck Association,¹⁷ a member services organization whose mission is to help protect, promote, and grow the mobile food industry in Washington.

¹⁵ King County, *Manage Your*

Subscriptions. public.govdelivery.com/accounts/WAKING/subscriber/new?topic_id=WAPHSKC_81. Accessed: April 2025.

¹⁶ Washington Hospitality Association. <https://wahospitality.org/>. Accessed April 2025.

¹⁷ Washington Food Truck Association. <https://wafoodtrucks.org/>. Accessed April 2025.

- **One-on-one technical support** provided to callers to the Food Safety Program seeking assistance; calls are staffed every weekday during regular business hours.
- **Engagement with small business advocacy organizations** whose aims include creating opportunities for entrepreneurship, by participating in meetings, presenting about the Food Safety Program and its actions, and engaging with their members about economic development opportunities (e.g., Seattle Restored,¹⁸ Seattle Good Business Network,¹⁹ Good Food Kitchens,²⁰ Rainier Beach Action Coalition²¹).
- **Nightlife food safety inspections** conducted in collaboration with the Seattle Police Department, the Seattle Fire Department, and the Seattle Department of Transportation as part of the Joint Enforcement Team. This team focuses on addressing regulatory issues through collaborative education and enforcement.
- **Feedback from agency partners**, including the Washington State Department of Health, other local health jurisdictions, the City of Seattle, Washington State Labor and Industries, the Seattle Fire Department, and the Seattle Department of Transportation. The program routinely engages with these partners to ensure alignment of strategies across programs, with a focus on streamlining the permitting process and reducing unpermitted vending.
- **Outreach to Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)**, including conversations about how the program can support vendors in navigating the permitting process, and how the program can potentially partner with CBOs to support business owners.
- **Community feedback in response to media engagement**, including stories about unpermitted vending trends, permitting barriers, and strategies the program is taking to improve food safety.

In response to the increased number of unpermitted street food vendors, and to address community feedback about challenges they have experienced with regard to the permitting process, the Food Safety Program created an internal departmental workgroup that includes a broad cross-section of its staff. Collectively, staff on the workgroup are subject matter experts representing supervisors, plan reviewers, a temporary event lead, a donated food distribution organization lead, a technical and policy lead, a meat safety lead, and program directors. The workgroup was asked to:

1. Identify the major barriers street food vendors encounter with regard to permitting, based on feedback the program has received from various stakeholders.
2. Learn from other comparable local health jurisdictions about ways to streamline permitting.
3. Identify potential impacts of actions on staffing, budgets, and collaborations with partners.
4. Propose a comprehensive set of recommendations aimed at addressing the identified barriers.

¹⁸ Seattle Restored. "Pop-ups and Art Installations in Empty Storefronts | Seattle Restored." seattlerestored.org/?gad_source=1&gclid=EAlaIqObChMIy_f3w-HniwMVKdfCBB0NpjTjEAAYASAAEgL47_D_BwE. Accessed April 2025.

¹⁹ Seattle Good Business Network. https://seattlegood.org/?gad_source=1&gclid=EAlaIqObChMI_5P1td3IjAMVCI-tBh3uYS3ZEAYASAAEgJJ4PD_BwE. Accessed April 2025.

²⁰ Good Food Kitchens. <https://goodfoodkitchens.org/>. Accessed April 2025.

²¹ Rainier Beach Action Coalition. <https://www.rbcoalition.org/>. Accessed April 2025.

IV. Report Requirements

Ordinance 19861 directs the Executive to transmit a report on streamlining and otherwise improving the food business permitting process to reduce barriers for small food businesses seeking permits. The Ordinance requirements are summarized in the box below and provided in detail in this section.

- A. Description of current food business permitting processes;*
- B. Data on current food business permitting timelines;*
- C. Options for streamlining and otherwise improving the food business permitting process to reduce barriers for small food businesses seeking permits, including resources necessary for or barriers to implementing each option;*
- D. A recommendation on whether to implement each option required in subsection C. of this proviso;*
- E. A workplan, including, but not limited to, a timeline of key milestones for implementing each option recommended in accordance with subsection D. of this proviso.*

The section is organized to follow the structure of Ordinance 19861. Each element of the Proviso is addressed.

A. Description of the current food business permitting processes

The Food Safety Program issues three types of food permits:²²

1. **Permanent food permits for businesses that retail out of brick-and-mortar places.** Examples include, restaurants, coffee shops, grocery stores, school cafeterias, and caterers. ^[OBJ]
2. **Permanent food permits for mobile food units that retail out of a food truck or a cart.** Examples include food trucks, hot dog carts, and espresso carts. ^[OBJ]
3. **Temporary food permits including Farmers Market that retail out of a temporary setup for a short duration.** Examples include Bite of Seattle and festivals around the county. ^[OBJ]

After submitting an application for a plan review (either online or in person), all permanent food businesses must undergo a plan review and a pre-opening inspection before being issued a permit to operate, as shown in the table below.²³ For temporary food businesses, a plan review is required after submitting an application.²⁴

²² King County. *Food Business Permits - King County, Washington*. <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dph/certificates-permits-licenses/food-business-permits>. Accessed April 2025.

²³ Public Health – Seattle & King County. Permanent food service business permit. <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dph/certificates-permits-licenses/food-business-permits/permanent-food-business-permit>. Accessed May 2025.

²⁴ Washington State Legislature. *Washington Administrative Code 246-215-09110 Plan Approval – Plan Review*: <https://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=246-215-09110>. Accessed April 2025.

Plan review ensures that establishments are built or renovated in ways that promote food safety and prevent code violations by addressing potential layout and equipment issues prior to construction or renovation. Pre-opening inspection ensures food establishments are built as approved during the plan review process. For existing food businesses, plans and specifications may also be required if there has been a significant menu change or change in the establishment’s method of operations.

For mobile food unit operators, vendors at farmers markets or temporary events, and caterers, plan review requires that these businesses identify a commercial kitchen where they can store and process food. In King County, there are about 30 large commercial kitchens that offer kitchen access to multiple food vendors.

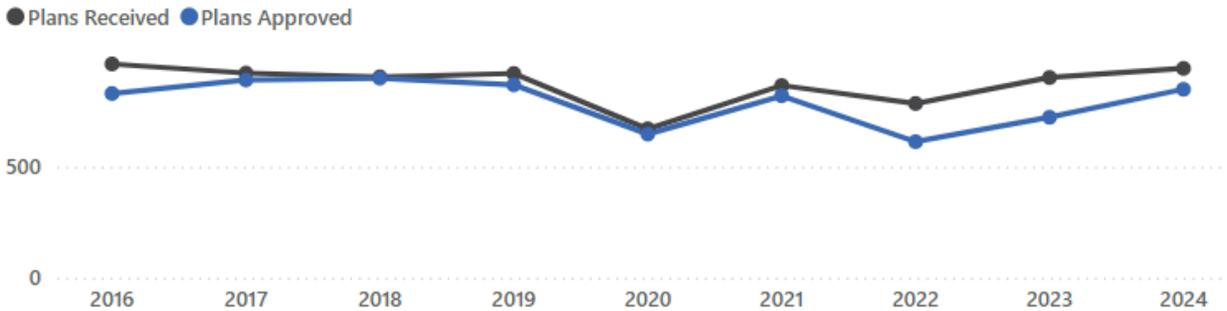
Permit type	Permitting process
<p>Permanent food permits for businesses that retail out of brick-and-mortar places</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Applicant submits final business plans and plan review application before construction/remodeling begins, along with supporting documents (e.g., site plan, menu, floor plan, equipment list) along with the plan review fee. (2) Plan reviewer reviews the submitted application and communicates with the applicant if changes are needed and if plans are approved. If not approved, applicant is given instructions for making corrections so that they can turn the application in to be reconsidered for approval. (3) Once plans are approved, the Plans Examiner provides an approval letter and supporting documents to the applicant. If additional review/approval is needed by other regulatory agencies, the applicant is instructed to contact other agencies for their approval. (4) Applicant builds/remodels the facility. (5) Applicant obtains the final plumbing inspection/permit approval. (6) Applicant pays for the operating permit. (7) Applicant contacts the plan reviewer to schedule a pre-operational inspection before opening for business or once the remodel has been completed. One week advance notice is needed. (8) A preoperational inspection is conducted, and if approved, an operating permit is issued by mail or email to the applicant. (9) If food establishment fails a pre-operational inspection because of deviation from approved plans, a return pre-operational inspection is scheduled, and the applicant is charged for return inspection.
<p>Permanent food permits for mobile food units that retail out of a food truck or a cart</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Applicant completes final business plans and plan review application, including copy of mobile food unit plans, commissary and restroom agreements, food preparation flow chart, menu, mobile food unit contact information or route or

Permit type	Permitting process
	<p>site location, and mobile questionnaire about operational procedures along with the plan review fee.</p> <p>(2) Plan reviewer reviews the submitted application and communicates with the applicant if changes are needed and if plan was approved. If not approved, applicant is given instructions for making corrections.</p> <p>(3) When the plan is approved, applicant applies for an operating permit to operate the mobile food unit.</p> <p>(4) Applicant schedules a pre-operational inspection.</p> <p>(5) A preoperational inspection is conducted, and if passed, an operating permit is issued.</p> <p>(6) A mobile food unit applicant may be required to obtain an additional approval from Labor and Industry, before it receives an approval from Public Health to open for business.</p>
<p>Temporary food permits including Farmers Market that retail out of a temporary setup for a short duration</p>	<p>(1) Depending on the menu, an applicant submits one of the three temporary applications (minimal food service application, moderate or complex food service application, or blanket permit application).</p> <p>(2) Applicant pays a temporary event permit fee.</p> <p>(3) After office plan review is completed by an inspector, operating permit is approved and issued to the applicant.</p> <p>(4) Applicants obtaining multiple or unlimited permits for moderate and complex menus, they are required to obtain a Certified Booth Operator training before or soon after operating permits are issued.</p>

B. Data on current food business permitting timelines

The number of plan review applications received by the Food Safety Program in 2024 surpassed the level received in the years leading up to the pandemic (943 plans received in 2024; 920 plans received in 2019). Figure 1 below shows the number of plans received and approved since 2016.

Figure 1. Number of plans received and approved over time



The Food Safety Program Plan Review Team has been steadily improving responsive times for plans submitted by new and remodeled restaurants and mobile food units). At the beginning of 2024, the average time in the plan review queue was 45 days with an average wait time of 74 days. The Food Safety Program’s goal was to reduce and maintain a response time under 21 days. In March 2024, the Food Safety Program has hired an additional plan reviewer on a short-term basis to address the backlog of plans awaiting reviews. As of the end of the first quarter of 2025, the plan review response time was 26 days, with an average time in the queue of 17 days.

Quarter	Date Range	Average Time in Queue	Wait Time	Plans in Queue
Quarter 1	1/1/2024-3/26/2024	45 days	74 days	160
Quarter 2	4/1/2024-7/02/2024	46 days	55 days	112
Quarter 3	7/1/2024-9/30/2024	32 days	24 days	39
Quarter 4	10/1/2024-12/31/2024	17 days	26 days	48
Quarter 1	1/1/2025-3/31/2025	17 days	26 days	65

C. Options for streamlining and otherwise improving the food business permitting process to reduce barriers for small food businesses seeking permits, including resources necessary for or barriers to implementing each option

The Food Safety Program has invested resources aimed at helping street food vendors overcome permitting barriers (see Appendix B), but additional work is needed upstream to address the barriers encountered by operators because regulatory approach alone cannot ensure food safety for the public or address the needs of food vendors. .

The following table is a summary of actions identified by the Food Safety Program that could further streamline and improve the food business permitting process to reduce barriers for small food businesses seeking permits. The Food Safety Program is implementing Actions 1-4 in 2025, and will begin implementing Action 5 in 2026.

Table 1: Options for streamlining and improving the food business permitting process

	Action	Barrier addressed	Resources needed
1	Contract with CBOs to conduct outreach to unpermitted street food vendors, to encourage them to apply for a permit and provide them with support	Navigating the permitting process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A program manager to provide oversight to the CBOs • Staff capacity to develop training materials • Staff capacity to train CBOs

	Action	Barrier addressed	Resources needed
	in submitting an application.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding to pay CBOs for performing the work
2	Reduce new vendor fees: Offer a one-time 50 percent reduced fee for new street food vendors with carts for their first year. The reduced fee includes 50 percent off plan review and annual permit fees for new street food vendors.	Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff capacity to develop and manage administrative processes to issue one-time reduced permit fees for new vendors. • Staff capacity to assess cost recovery and determine whether cost of program is offset by reduced time/effort spent on enforcement related to unpermitted vending.
3	Offer six-month pilot commercial kitchen vouchers to support new and unpermitted street food vendors.	Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff capacity to set up a Request for Applications and establish a contract with commercial kitchens. • Staff capacity to manage accounting and reimbursement for the contracts. • Funding for commercial kitchen contracts.
4	Pilot seasonal permitting options for “pop-up” vendors (currently booths/stands are only allowed as part of temporary events/farmers markets).	Lack of permit category	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff capacity to work additional evenings/weekends to coordinate and cover inspections. • Staff capacity to develop a comprehensive operational plan, and conduct a pilot and evaluation before implementing the changes at a larger scale.
5	Lower start-up costs by offering a modified plan review for vendors using a pre-approved cart design for specific low-risk menu items.	Currently all mobile units must satisfy the same mobile plan review requirements regardless of the type of food served.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff capacity to explore feasibility with cart builders and assess the costs • Staff capacity to set up a Request for Applications and establish and manage contracts.

The following is a summary of the actions listed in the table above:

Action #1: Improve permit navigation by contracting with CBOs to offer additional support to street food vendors with the permitting process

Under this action, the Food Safety Program is providing up to \$50K in grant funding to up to three CBOs to conduct outreach to unpermitted street food vendors, including food trucks, carts, trailers, pop-ups,

tents, booths, and support them in navigating the process of obtaining a permit to operate. CBOs will host workshops, accept referrals, support unpermitted street food vendors with their permitting applications, and connect vendors to Public Health for additional support as needed. CBOs will have strong ties to the community of unpermitted mobile food vendors, and will provide information, assistance, and support for both starting and sustaining a permitted mobile food unit. CBOs will utilize peer education methods to provide trainings and knowledge sharing and will also build and develop educational materials and curriculum that can be used for the community at large.

Action #2: Lower business start-up costs by offering a 50 percent reduced fee for new street food vendors with carts. The reduced fee includes 50 percent off plan review and annual permit fees for new street food vendors.

As an incentive to bring unpermitted street food vendors into compliance, street food vendors will be eligible for a one-time reduction in both plan review and permit fees for their first cart. A first-time cart owner would save \$486 for the plan review and between \$304 - \$607 for the permit fee (depending on the risk level of the cart). A vendor will receive a reduction in fees between \$790 and \$1093. This offer will be bundled with a voucher for six months of access to a commercial kitchen (refer to Action #3). These incentives will be offered in one of two ways: (1) To street food vendors that the Food Safety Program has identified as operating without a permit and are taking steps toward compliance, and (2) via CBOs providing outreach to various communities on behalf of the county (refer to Action #1). The Food Safety Program expects about 50 street food vendors to qualify for the fee reduction program. The Program is expected to run for one year, with an option to offer the same fee reduction for another group of street food vendors in 2026, pending funding and success of the action.

Action #3: Lower financial barriers by offering six-month commercial kitchen vouchers to support new and unpermitted street food vendors.

Under this action, the Food Safety Program will establish contracts with CBOs, faith-based organizations, schools, and Donated Food Distribution Organizations that are able to offer affordable rates to food business owners who are seeking space for commercial food preparation. The program will prioritize facilities that can offer affordable rates long-term (i.e., beyond the term of the contract). Unpermitted vendors that have been identified by the Food Safety Program will be offered vouchers to use these approved commercial kitchens for a period of six months, up to \$2200-\$4500 per vendor. This approach could expand the number of available commercial kitchens in King County and create a sustainable strategy for identifying affordable commercial kitchen rentals for street food vendors.

Action #4: Offer additional temporary permitting options for “pop-up” vendors.

This action would assess the feasibility of offering seasonal (up to three months within a permit year) permitting pathways for “pop-up” vendors: (1) Allow vendors to set up a booth/table within an existing permitted food establishment that is able to provide access to a kitchen for food preparation, wastewater disposal, and fresh water supply, as well as plumbing for handwashing and a restroom; (2) Allow vendors to sell foods that are prepared and packaged at a commercial kitchen and sold from an unoccupied cart, trailer, booth, or stand from a fixed outside location (e.g., Waterfront, City Hall), where the vendor is able to access a handwashing station and a restroom. Vendors will be required to keep foods either cold or hot during vending. The Food Safety Program would like to collaborate on the City of Seattle to identify a designated location where street use permits would be issued to pop-up food vendors. This proposal will open opportunities for seasonal food businesses such as those offering cut fruit, shaved ice, prepackaged and precooked tamales, and steamed hot dogs to operate as “pop-ups.”

Action #5: Lower startup costs by offering a modified plan review for vendors using a pre-approved cart design(s) for specific menu items.

This action aims to lower barriers by developing pre-approved cart designs for specific types of menus. These designs, which would be available to the public when applying for a permit, will include options for hot, cold holding and reheating of foods. By providing a list of pre-approved cart designs to the public, plan review times are reduced, thereby allowing for lower plan review costs and turnaround time.

D. A recommendation on whether to implement each option required in subsection C of this proviso

The Food Safety Program is planning to implement each of the actions described above.

However, the Food Safety Program will delay initiating Action #5 until 2026. This action will require the Food Safety Program to identify a cart design to support several use cases (reheating, hot holding, and cold holding). The Program will develop a call for designers (e.g., manufacturers or individual business owners) to submit designs. This Program will then develop new plan review application materials for a pre-approved cart design, including determining new reduced rates for the application and plan review, which will require approval by Board of Health.

E. A workplan, including, but not limited to, a timeline of key milestones for implementing each option recommended in accordance with subsection D. of this proviso

Action #1: Improve permit navigation by contracting with CBOs to offer additional support to street food vendors with the permitting process.

To implement this action, the Food Safety Program published a Request for Applications in Q1 2025. CBOs have submitted applications, which were reviewed and rated by the Program based on each organization’s experience with the unpermitted street food vendors, capacity to take on this work, proposed scope of work, and budget.

The Food Safety Program established one-year contracts with selected CBOs in May 2025, with a possible second year extension, pending funding and success of the action.

Milestone	Task Details	Target Deadline
Request for Applications ²⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Determine funding source/amount and scopes of workDraft RFAPublish RFA	Completed
Application deadline		Q1, 2025
Select CBOs that will be funded	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Review and score applicationsNotify CBOs of decisions	Completed

²⁵ Public Health - Seattle & King County. [Supporting Street Food Vendors in Becoming Permitted.](https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dph/about-king-county/about-public-health/working-with-public-health/funding-opportunities/supporting-street-vendors-permits) <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dph/about-king-county/about-public-health/working-with-public-health/funding-opportunities/supporting-street-vendors-permits>. Accessed May 2025.

Milestone	Task Details	Target Deadline
Establish contracts with CBOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin contracts 	Q2, 2025 Completed
Train CBOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine staffing needed to train CBOs • Develop trainings • Schedule trainings 	Q2 – Q3, 2025 In progress
Monitor CBO work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess completed work • Provide feedback • Issue reimbursements 	Ongoing 2025-2026
Close out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final reports from CBOs 	Q2, 2026

Action #2: Lower business start-up costs by offering a 50 percent reduced fee for new street food vendors with carts. The reduced fee includes 50 percent off plan review and annual permit fees for new street food vendors.

To implement this action, the Food Safety program will establish qualification criteria for the reduced fees. The program will then develop a system for tracking businesses that have received the reduced fees and will communicate the fee changes to the public.

Milestone	Task Details	Target Deadline
Define qualification criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish eligibility criteria for receiving the fee reduction (e.g., street food vendors, first application, working out of a commissary kitchen). 	Q3, 2025 Completed
Fee reduction tracking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish how the reduced fee will be entered into the system and tracked. 	Q3, 2025 In progress
Communication/ Outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a communication plan to provide outreach to street food vendors, in collaboration with CBOs and other partners 	Q3, 2025
Training and launch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide trainings to field staff, plan reviewers, permit techs and CBOs. 	Q3 – Q4, 2025
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a system to track plan review time. Establish a system to track time/effort to support the qualified vendors. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Track success and failure rates (e.g., how many vendors who qualify for the reduced fee fail to complete the plan review process) Develop evaluation plan to assess the success of the pilot project (e.g., number of food vendors remaining in business after the first year of the program). Conduct a survey soliciting feedback from vendors (e.g., how many obtained an operating permit the following year) 	Q3 – Q4, 2025

Action #3: Lower financial barriers by offering six-month commercial kitchen vouchers to support new and unpermitted street food vendors.

To implement this action, the Food Safety Program will invite CBOs, community centers, faith-based organizations, schools, and Donated Food Distribution Organizations to participate in a webinar to hear about this action and the Food Safety Program and ask questions about the RFA process. Through the RFA, the program will identify community commercial kitchens in locations spread out across King County to partner with King County in this action. Applicants will be selected based on criteria such as affordability, ability to sustain operations beyond the funding period, geographic location, and operational capacity (e.g., number of vendors supported, adequate workspace and equipment, availability of parking, and operating hours).

The Food Safety Program will contract with selected commercial kitchen operators to offer a monthly discounted commercial kitchen access to new and unpermitted food vendors. The one-year contract will include a provision for the commercial kitchen operators to receive between \$2200-\$4500 over a six-month period for every vendor they are assigned to host.

To identify new and unpermitted vendor participants in this action, the Food Safety Program will conduct outreach to unpermitted vendors who have been identified and closed in 2024 and 2025 and are taking steps toward compliance. The Food Safety Program’s goal is to support up to 50 vendors.

The Food Safety Program will conduct an evaluation upon completion of the project to summarize the number of vendors who were supported, including an end-of-program survey to participating vendors and operators of commercial kitchens.

Milestone	Task Details	Target Deadline
Establish scope of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine program structure (eligibility requirements, reimbursement structure, etc.) Determine tracking needed Determine staffing needed Determine funding source/amount 	Q2, 2025 Completed
Call for Applications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draft RFA Publish RFA 	Q2-Q3, 2025 RFA draft completed; will publish in June
Applications open	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collect applications Review applications 	Q3, 2025 Application deadline July 2025
Select organizations that will be funded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish contracts 	Q3, 2025 Anticipate finalizing contracts by Aug 31
Launch project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor deliverables Reimburse organizations for expenses 	Q3-Q4, 2025 Anticipate starting contracts October 1st
Close out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate outcomes 	Q3-Q4, 2025

Action #4: Offer additional temporary permitting options for “pop-up” vendors.

To implement this action, the Food Safety Program will revisit the definition of a temporary event and create a working definition for a “pop-up” food vendor; establish policies for operations; determine procedures for the program to track permits and conduct inspections; define roles/responsibilities for program staff; update application materials, and develop trainings for staff. The Food Safety Program will launch this action as a pilot and at the end of the pilot, will assess the feasibility of this action. Since “pop-up” permitting is not defined within the current BOH-Title 5 Food Code, the Food Safety Program will request a Board of Health Rule and Regulation revision to codify the “pop-up” definition after the successful completion and evaluation of the pilot program.

Milestone	Task Details	Target Deadline
Establish permitting category definitions and operational plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a workgroup comprised of internal staff and permitted vendors Evaluate and revisit definitions (e.g., temporary event, pop-up) and permitting details Identify who will be approving applications 	Q3, 2025
Identify needs/impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine staffing Identify required resources that will need to be allocated Identify trainings that need to be developed Identify materials that need to be developed 	Q3, 2025
Prepare for limited pilot before operationalizing changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop application materials Determine how the Food Safety Program will track permits Outreach to potential vendors to participate Establish metrics for evaluating success of pilot Allocate required resources Develop trainings and other educational materials 	Q3 – Q4, 2025
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Train staff 	Q3-Q4, 2025
Launch and evaluate pilot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Launch pilot Conduct evaluation Translate recommendations into policies 	Q4 2025 – Q1, 2026
Launch permitting changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update website Media outreach Outreach to vendors 	Q2-Q3, 2026

Action #5: Lower startup costs by offering a modified plan review for vendors using a pre-approved cart design(s) for specific menu items.

This action will be delayed until 2026, pending further exploration, development, and resources.

Milestone	Task Details	Target Deadline
Draft call for proposals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define use cases (reheating, hot holding, cold holding) and components that need to be included in application Draft call for manufacturers to develop cart specifications and submit applications for plan review, for specific types of menus Identify list of manufacturers to reach out to Create application materials for plan review for a pre-approved cart design 	Q1-Q2, 2026

Milestone	Task Details	Target Deadline
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine rates for application and plan review (e.g., review special service fees) 	
Publish call for proposals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct outreach to invite applicants to submit designs (letters, webinar) 	Q2-Q3, 2026
Review proposals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approve designs that meet criteria according to existing plan review procedures Issue approval letters that include disclaimers outlining limitations on responsibility for approval of design at time of submission 	Q2-Q4, 2026
Review rates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issue memo to BOH to approve reduction in plan review fees for carts that are manufactured according to pre-approved designs Modify policies/procedures (how to maintain list of approved plans, how to review new designs, how to review and charge for plans that deviate from approved designs) 	2027
Database updates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modify public-facing application to allow applicants to choose pre-approved designs at a reduced plan review fee 	Q1-Q2, 2027
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create list of approved designs Update application materials to include information about approved designs and any rate changes and disclaimers Outreach to community-based organizations to encourage them to support vendors by purchasing approved carts Train staff on changes 	Q1-Q2, 2027

V. Conclusion/Next Actions

In recent years, the number of unpermitted food vendors selling foods to the public has significantly increased, locally and nationally. In the experience of the Food Safety Program, most street food vendors would like to operate in compliance with the Retail Food Code but lack either the knowledge or the resources to do so. The Food Safety Program recognizes that a regulatory approach alone will not protect food safety for the public or address the financial and support needs of food vendors; the barriers encountered by operators need to be addressed upstream. Therefore, the program has been approaching the issue of unpermitted vending through a variety of ways, including by offering financial incentives; improving access to commercial kitchens; providing outreach and educational support to vendors; improving the food permitting process; helping the public more easily identify permitted street food vendors; and developing partnerships to discourage unpermitted vending.

The Food Safety Program recognizes that additional work is needed to lower permitting barriers for vendors. The key barriers in the food permitting process include:

- Knowledge gaps
- Limited access to commissary kitchens
- Limited permitting options
- Uniform permitting requirements
- Financial challenges

To address these barriers, the Food Safety Program established a workgroup and advanced the following four actions in an effort to lower permitting barriers.

- Improve permit navigation by contracting with CBOs to offer additional support to street food vendors with the permitting process.
- Lower financial barriers by offering six-month commissary kitchen vouchers to support new and unpermitted street food vendors.
- Offer additional temporary permitting options for “pop-up” vendors.
- Lower business start-up costs by offering a 50 percent reduced fee for new street food vendors with carts. The reduced fee includes 50 percent off plan review and annual permit fees for new street food vendors.

The Food Safety Plan Review Team has been steadily improving responsiveness to plans submitted by new and remodeled restaurants and mobile food units. As of the end of February 2025, the plan review turnaround time was 20 days. The Food Safety Program’s goal is to maintain the current wait time under 21 days.

The Food Safety Program has started to implement some of these actions and is in the process of operationalizing plans for the remaining ones. The program does not intend to hire staff to manage each project; therefore, the time required to initiate each action is variable, as it depends on the availability of staff to work towards reaching each milestone. Although there are some factors that may limit the availability of staff to implement the actions in the expected timelines (e.g., budget and implementation of a new database for permitting and licensing in Q4 of 2025), the Food Safety Program is committed to avoiding delays to the extent possible.

VI. Appendix

Appendix A: Fees for Starting a Mobile Food Business.

Fee Description	Average Cost
Mobile unit	Truck: \$30K-100K for a used truck, \$50K or more for a new truck Trailer: \$6K or more Cart: \$5K or more
Register business structure (state)	\$180-\$230
State business license	\$50
City business license	\$110 (for Seattle, varies by city)
L&I inspection	\$115
L&I permit to use propane, solid fuel, open flame, or charcoal	\$400
Street use vending permit	\$400-800 (for Seattle, varies by city)
PHSKC plan review fee	\$972 (4-hour base) for a new operation
PHSKC mobile annual permit fee	\$608 for Risk 1/\$972 for Risk 2/\$1,215 for Risk 3
Commissary kitchen fee	\$300-1000 a month
Food handler's permit	\$10

Appendix B: Investments the Food Safety Program has made to help street food vendors overcome permitting barriers.

- **Offering financial incentives:** Prorating permit fees on a quarterly basis, as approved by the Board of Health in February 2024.
- **Improving access to commercial kitchens:**
 - Building an online searchable database²⁶ of commercial kitchens
 - Identifying low-cost commercial kitchens that can be added to the database (e.g., non-profits, schools, community centers, faith-based organizations that offer their kitchens to the public at reduced rates).
 - The Food Safety Program has broadened the definition of commercial kitchens to include approvable commercial kitchens located in community centers, faith-based organizations, schools, and restaurants that meet the equipment and facility needs of the food operator.
- **Improving the food permitting process and providing educational support to vendors:**
 - Ensuring staff can provide multilingual support to the public.

²⁶ King County, *Commissary Kitchens in King County - King County, Washington*. <https://kingcounty.gov/es-es/dept/dph/health-safety/food-safety/educational-resources/commissary-kitchens>. Accessed: April 2025.

- Reducing plan review wait time from 10 weeks to three weeks.
- Simplifying and translating public-facing materials about permitting steps and sharing these materials with community-based organizations (CBOs) that support street food vendors who want to become permitted.
- Beginning in late 2024 and continuing into 2025, organizing information sessions aimed at providing training and one-on-one support in multiple languages on how to navigate the permitting process.

The Food Safety Program has simultaneously invested in developing strategies to support the public in making informed decisions about where they eat by:

- Conducting media interviews in English and Spanish languages to bring attention to the benefits of permitting as it relates to food safety.
- Expanding food safety rating placards²⁷ to mobile vendors, meat and seafood shops, bakeries, and caterers to help the public identify permitted vendors.
- Publishing blog posts²⁸ aimed at educating the public about how to reduce their risk of foodborne illness and support permitted vendors.

The Food Safety Program has encouraged partnerships intended to discourage unpermitted food vending, including:

- Strengthening collaboration with several city agencies with a code-compliance focus aimed at responding to complaints related to unpermitted food vendors during late nights.
- Strengthening partnerships with major sports venues to coordinate enforcement of unpermitted vendors.

²⁷ Lovell, Sam. "Public Health's Food Safety Rating System Is Expanding! Here is What to Expect." *Public Health Insider*, 16 Dec. 2024, publichealthinsider.com/2024/12/16/public-healths-food-safety-rating-system-is-expanding-heres-what-to-expect.

²⁸ "How to Reduce Your Risk of Foodborne Illness and Support Permitted Food Vendors." *Public Health Insider*, 19 Mar. 2025, publichealthinsider.com/2024/09/06/how-to-reduce-your-risk-of-foodborne-illness-and-support-permitted-food-vendors.