

City of Charleston

Business License Certificate of Occupancy Application Process

Welcome to the City of Charleston!

We are pleased that you are considering the City of Charleston for the location of your business. The following information is provided to answer some of the questions you may have regarding the various steps associated with starting a business in the City. Government rules and regulations can be overwhelming to a first-time business owner so if you have any questions please contact our Business Services Division at (843) 958-6407.

Business License CO Approval Process

A Business License Certificate of Occupancy (BLCO) is required for all businesses and non-profits that are located within City limits. Applications can be obtained online at charleston-sc.gov/revenuecollections or from the Revenue Collections – Business License Office which is located at 2 George Street in the Permit Center.

The Business License CO process is an opportunity to confirm that your proposed use is permitted in the property's zoning district and that the structure meets applicable building and fire code requirements.

Please submit your application to the Revenue Collections – Business License Office. The office will then forward the application to Zoning, the Fire Marshal, and Building Inspections Divisions for review. These Divisions may contact you with questions regarding your application and to schedule necessary inspections.

You can expect the approval process to take approximately 10 business days after the submittal of the application.

Fire Safety

All Business License CO applicants are subject to a fire safety inspection. A Fire Marshal will contact you to schedule the inspection. To facilitate this process, please complete the [Fire Inspection Self Survey](#) prior to the inspection. Some key fire code requirements:

- Exits may not be obstructed and must include approved exiting and locking hardware.
- Exit signs must be illuminated.
- Emergency lights must work properly.
- Current testing and service of alarms, suppression systems, extinguishers and the documentation confirming service from a qualified company.



Prior to leasing, purchasing, or otherwise committing to a property you are **STRONGLY ADVISED** to confirm that the zoning and physical layout of the building and site are appropriate for the use intended and will comply with City Codes.

This includes having a clear understanding of any code restrictions, limitations or architectural guidelines that may impact your operation and any building and site modifications that may be necessary to open for business.

The City's Zoning Ordinance permits certain types of businesses in specific areas of the City. Zoning staff will assist you in determining whether a specific location is appropriately zoned for your type business.

All new signage associated with your business requires Zoning approval and a building permit. Zoning staff will assist you in determining the sign standards applicable to your business site, building, and/or suite.

Staff will also assist you in determining if a review by the Board of Architectural Review (BAR) or the Design Review Board (DRB) is required for any exterior modifications being made to the building.

Contact Zoning by emailing [Zoning](#) or calling (843) 724-3765. You can also visit the office located in the Permit Center at 2 George Street Monday through Friday 8:30am to 5:00pm.

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Most Business License CO Applications follow one of the following scenarios:

Scenario 1: Change of Tenant with the Same Type Use

If you are occupying or relocating to a building or space that was previously occupied by the same type business as yours, there are generally no changes required to the building or site unless the building was damaged or altered without permits. There may be some exceptions to that rule when there is a serious or life safety code violation or certain maintenance needs to be performed, such as updates to electrical, mechanical, plumbing, or life safety systems.

Scenario 2: Change of Use or New Construction

Change of use always requires compliance with current building, fire, and zoning codes, which in turn usually requires changes to the building and site. These changes will require review and approval. Some types of issues that may arise include:

Site Plan Requirements	Building Requirements
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Additional parking.- Handicap parking and signage.- Parking lot improvements.- Widening driveway/access.- Stormwater/drainage improvements.- Additional landscaping/buffer requirements.- Approval of signage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Handicap access and accessible facilities.- Additional restrooms.- Exit lights and emergency lighting.- Fire alarms and suppression systems.- Floor plans and seating layouts.- Electrical changes and estimate of electrical service size.- An architect may be required.

If you are changing the type of use of your building, please call the Zoning Division (724-3765) and Building Inspections (724-7320) for direction on what documentation you need to provide for review.

Business Services

The Business Services Division supports and promotes new and existing businesses in the community. If you need assistance or direction with opening your business, please call (843) 958-6407 or email [Business Services](#).

Additional Approvals

Some businesses require additional approvals from external agencies:

Any business **servicing food** requires a SC Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) permit and inspection. Contact the SCDHEC Food Protection Division at (803) 896-0640 or [scdhec.gov](#).

A license from the state of South Carolina is required if you **intend to sell or serve alcoholic beverages**. Contact the SC Department of Revenue Alcohol Beverage Licensing Division at (803) 898-5864 or [sctax.org](#).



A **permit is required** to construct, enlarge, alter, repair, move, remove, or demolish any building, structure, or part thereof. Types of work that require building permits includes:

- All **new construction** work.
- All alterations to existing construction.
- All tenant improvements.
- A change in use (office space to a restaurant).
- New signage.

Please note that a business license will not be issued until a Construction Certificate of Occupancy is obtained. If you have questions regarding building permits contact Building Inspections at (843) 724-7320 or inspections@charleston-sc.gov.

Charleston Water Systems (CWS) requires the installation of a [grease trap](#) for all businesses that **prepare food**. CWS will determine the size needed for your establishment. Please contact Angus Maclean macleanajc@charlestoncpw.com or (843) 308-8277.

Charleston Water Systems (CWS) also requires payment of [impact fees](#) based on **water usage** of the business. This requirement often impacts restaurants and beauty salons. Please contact Theresa Gadson at gadsonte@charlestoncpw.com or (843) 727-7134.

Revenue Collections - Business License

2 George Street – Permit Center
Charleston, SC 29401
P: 843-724-3711

W: charleston-sc.gov/revenuecollections