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TORIANO PORTER

Is this Independence tow company operating illegally in KC’s River Market? Yes, I’d say / Opinion

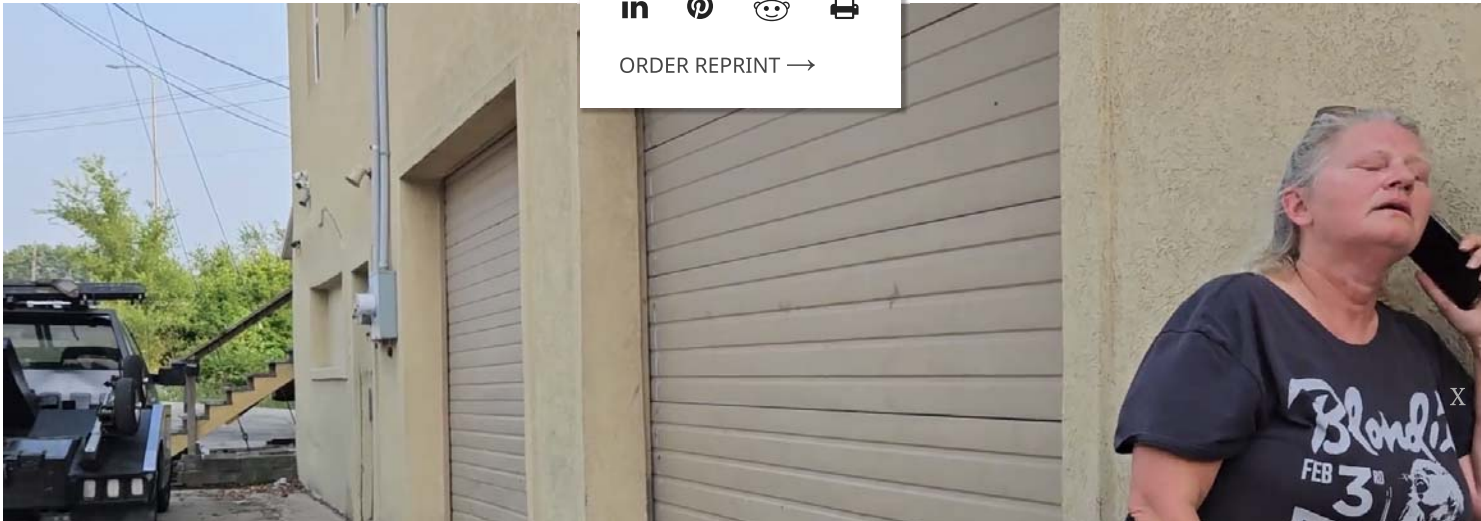


BY TORIANO PORTER

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Michelle Brown was shopping in the River Market on July 15, 2023. When she returned to where she'd parked in the 500 block of Delaware, she discovered her car had been towed to Independence by Autobot Towing, apparently illegally. BY TORIANO PORTER



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Autobot Towing of Independence is breaking the law — knowingly or unknowingly — and Kansas City area residents are getting stuck with the bill.

Here's just the first way the tow company plays fast and loose with the rules when it hauls cars away from Kansas City: Autobot accepts only cash payments from people to retrieve their vehicles from its impound lot in Independence. According to Kansas City municipal code, a tow service must accept credit or debit cards and traveler's checks, in addition to U.S. currency.

No such rule applies for tow operators in Independence, Autobot manager Charles Cosgrove argued. But it doesn't matter. Under Kansas City code, any "facility owned, operated, leased or used by a tow vehicle service, whether that facility is located within or beyond the city" operates under the same law.

TOP VIDEOS

Kansas City's Regulated Industries Division oversees towing licenses in the city. The agency should make it a priority to look into how Autobot and other private towing companies in the metropolitan area operate in and around the River Market and other entertainment districts.

Last weekend, Autobot Towing used an unmarked tow truck — which is illegal here — to remove a car from a parking lot in the 500 block of Delaware Street. Under a division of the [city ordinance related to non-consent tows](#), the tow business name, address and phone number must be clearly visible on each side of all its vehicles.

Of the two Autobot trucks I saw in action over the weekend, only one had the proper signage.

Both trucks were marked, Cosgrove said. Because the darker truck needed a wash, the light script on the vehicle was barely legible, he contended. I looked long and hard at the vehicle in question and still couldn't locate the proper requirements. (Keep reading to learn what I *did* witness in the River Market.)

There are more potential legal shenanigans: Kansas City police must be notified before the removal process begins, according to city code. There are reasons for this, most notably to determine whether a car has been reported stolen. In this case, Autobot didn't report the tow until hours later, according to police officials.

HAS YOUR AUTOMOBILE BEEN TAKEN TOO?

By my count, potentially up to three laws were broken by one company during a single tow. Who knows how often this occurs?

There are laws in place to protect us from unscrupulous business practices.

But what's the point if a company doesn't adhere to the rules?

What will Kansas City officials do about these potential violations?

Epoch Property Management owns the lot. Therefore, none of the fees associated with a tow from the private property end up in Kansas City public coffers.

The lot serves six apartment buildings and nine commercial businesses, and is open to the public by pay-to-park for visitors to the River Market and merchants nearby, a company rep said.

Autobot Towing removes vehicles at the request of Mo Kan Midwest Property Services, a third-party parking lot management company in Sugar Creek that Epoch contracts with to regulate parking, according to an Epoch rep.

Attempts to reach the [Mo Kan Midwest business agent registered with the Missouri Secretary of State's office](#) were unsuccessful. After responding to my initial inquiries,

a representative from Epoch didn't bother to reply to my follow-up questions about Autobot.

Has your vehicle been towed under questionable circumstances from the River Market area? If so, I want to hear from you. If you're willing to share with me your recent horror story on towing in Kansas City, email me at tporter@kcstar.com



"Who are these people?" who take away a car because its owner made a typo on a smartphone app, asked Michelle Brown. Toriano Porter *The Star*

TYPON SMARTPHONE APP, CAR HAULED AWAY

On Saturday, Michelle Brown, 52, made the nearly half-hour trip from Kearney to the River Market to shop for antiques. A friend joined her. Brown used a smartphone app to pay for one hour of parking on a private lot in the 500 block between Wyandotte and Delaware.

Less than an hour later, Brown returned to the lot, but her car was gone. Autobot Towing took it. And I captured the act on video.

A driver in an unmarked black Dodge Ram tow truck (or poorly marked, if you believe Autobot) removed Brown's 2020 Nissan Altima from the lot and drove off.

Brown, still in disbelief that her car was towed, nervously chain-smoked, flicking away the discarded butts with uncanny precision. At times, her face turned beet red as she spoke.

By her own admission, she was livid. Turns out, she had made a simple mistake — one you or I could have done. She entered the wrong plate number into the payment app, typing the letter I instead of the number 1, she said. That simple error cost her hundreds of dollars in Independence to retrieve her vehicle from Autobot.

“Who are these people?” Brown asked.

Having to pay hundreds to retrieve a vehicle for failing to pay a \$5 parking fee, or for making an innocent mistake entering a license plate number on a touchscreen, seems predatory. A ticket, yes. Wouldn’t a warning work? Where’s the due process in that?

If the city doesn’t act with urgency, that bad business model will continue.

After she showed them the error and evidence that she had paid, Epoch reimbursed Brown the \$320 towing fee she paid to get her car back. But it was damaged, she said. Oops, not our fault, Epoch replied. Take it up with Autobot.

To make up for the inconvenience of Brown’s tow, Epoch Property Management also covered the costs of the ride-hailing service she’d used to get to the impound lot. An officer with the Independence Police Department gave her a lift to a nearby ATM, because the cash-only tow office didn’t have one. Add insult to injury.

What about others whose automobiles have been hauled away under similar circumstances? Will they ever get a refund?



A worker at Autobot Towing told Michelle Brown, right, to go outside the office and wait. Toriano Porter *The Star*

TRUCK OPERATOR DIDN'T NOTIFY POLICE DEPARTMENT

Autobot Towing often removes vehicles after using a car equipped with a license plate reader that patrols the lot, scanning license plates on the property and checking them against the database of drivers who have paid to park, according to the Epoch rep.

I watched that vehicle — I dubbed it “the rabbit” — circle parking lots looking for potential violators near Betty Rae’s Ice Cream, Il Lazzarone pizzeria, Tribe Street Kitchen and other River Market businesses.

Brown’s car wasn’t the only one towed that day, Kansas City police officials said. Autobot removed four vehicles from the same block on Delaware, according to police. I witnessed two of them being taken away. But Autobot didn’t inform law enforcement before taking those cars.

Will Kansas City officials act?

My instincts — and some very damning evidence — tell me something’s not right about some of these companies’ business practices. Look for future updates in this space.

Anyone with concerns about towing in River Market or any other area in Kansas City may contact Joe Hodgin with the Kansas City Regulated Industries Division at joe.hodgin@kcmo.org

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