



Science Centres

2023 Value-for-Money Audit

Why we did this audit

- Ontario is home to the two largest science centres in Canada: the Ontario Science Centre, in Toronto, and Science North, in Sudbury.
- The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport (Ministry) provides an annual operating grant of \$19.4 million to the Ontario Science Centre and \$6.8 million to Science North.
- This is our Office's first value-for-money audit of the Ontario Science Centre and Science North and the Ministry's oversight of the science centres.

Why it matters

- The two science centres are provincial agencies with a legislated mandate to stimulate public interest in science and technology, collect and display exhibits, and deliver educational programs. In 2022/23, children and youth under the age of 18 made up more than 50% of visitors at both science centres.
- Attendance and memberships at both centres have been declining over the past decade.
- Major initiatives are under way at each science centre. Science North was in the midst of a major expansion project. After our audit was initiated, the Ontario government announced plans to relocate the Ontario Science Centre to Ontario Place.

What we found

Ontario Science Centre Relocation Decision-Making Was Based on Incomplete Information and Excluded Input from Important Stakeholders

- The 2023 cost/benefit analysis used to support the decision to relocate the Ontario Science Centre did not include all costs for both options assessed. For example, financing, transaction and legal costs for the construction of the new science centre projected under the public-private partnership (P3) model were not included, or similar costs associated with staying at the current location. Incremental parking costs for the relocation were also not included.
- The April 2023 relocation proposal to government decision-makers did not include concerns raised about expected attendance, and travel times and car access to the Ontario Place location, especially for suburban families and school groups.
- Discussions with the City of Toronto before the decision was made to relocate were limited in any substance or detail, and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and large school boards within the GTA directly impacted by the relocation were not consulted.
- Plans to continue to construct, sell and rent exhibits—legislated objectives—remain uncertain within the relocation plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS 1 and 2

Financial Sustainability of the Ontario Science Centre Could Be Improved

- Pre-pandemic attendance declined by 12.5% from 2013/14 to 2018/19.
- The Ontario Science Centre could be doing more to improve its financial sustainability. Government funding accounted for an average of 55% of the Ontario Science Centre's total revenues between 2012/13 and 2018/19, the last complete fiscal year before operations were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Ontario Science Centre's revenue from its concessions (gift shops and restaurants) averaged \$420,000, much lower than comparable Canadian science centres from 2012/13 to 2018/19.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Deferred Maintenance Projects Continually Denied Funding

- As of April 2022, the centre had \$370 million in deferred maintenance and critical repairs. Since 2017, 42 projects deemed critical had not received funding.
- In addition to deferred maintenance, the centre had to close a pedestrian bridge due to structural issues and spent \$2.4 million in 2022/23 to shuttle visitors from the main entrance to exhibition halls, negatively impacting visitor experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS 4, 5 and 6

Not All Exhibits Were Evaluated for Effectiveness by the Ontario Science Centre

- Exhibits were not always evaluated for effectiveness (for example, their popularity and educational value). There was also limited assessment of the feedback received from surveys, resulting in little improvement to the existing exhibits.

RECOMMENDATIONS 7, 8 and 9

Science North's Financial Sustainability

- Pre-pandemic attendance declined by 8% from 2016/17 to 2018/19, the last fiscal year not impacted by the pandemic.
- Science North could be doing more to improve its financial sustainability.

RECOMMENDATION 10

Capital Planning for the Go Deeper Project Inadequate

- Costs for the model mine expansion (Go Deeper project) had substantially increased—from an initial budget of \$5 million in October 2020 to \$15 million by October 2023—primarily due to increases in excavation and construction costs, poor planning and ineffective project management.

RECOMMENDATION 11

Science North Exhibits Could Be Evaluated More Robustly

- Feedback on Science North's educational and outreach programs was positive, but attendance has dropped.
- Science North could better evaluate the effectiveness of its exhibits (for example, their popularity and educational value).

RECOMMENDATIONS 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16

Conclusions

- Both science centres performed well in delivering educational programs to students, based on our discussions with school boards in the Greater Toronto and Sudbury areas and on the feedback collected from science teachers in Ontario.
- Attendance for both science centres had declined by 2018/19 (the last fiscal year not impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic): at Science North, attendance was down 8% from a peak in 2016/17; at the Ontario Science Centre, it was down 12.5% from a peak in 2013/14. However, attendance at both centres shows signs of a post-pandemic recovery.
- Both science centres could do more to improve financial sustainability, such as assessing which existing lines of business are profitable, where costs need to be managed more effectively and exploring new opportunities to generate revenue.
- The recent decision to relocate the Ontario Science Centre was made without the benefit of input from key stakeholders and with preliminary and incomplete cost information. In some instance where information was available, it was not included in the final proposal to government decision-makers.
- Multiple qualitative and quantitative factors need to be taken into consideration for decisions for both the new science centre at Ontario Place and the existing site, moving forward.
- Science North's expansion project proceeded without proper planning and consultation, resulting in substantial cost overruns and delays. The Go Deeper project to expand its model mine had, at the time of our audit, been delayed by almost two years and even with a reduced scope its costs had increased by \$10 million from October 2020 to October 2023 to \$15 million. The lessons learned from the Go Deeper project should be applied to all capital projects.