

With closure of Ontario Science Centre, Conservative Premier Ford attacks science, education and the working class

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Ontario Conservative Premier Doug Ford's snap decision last June to order the immediate and permanent closure of the Ontario Science Centre (OSC), located since 1969 at its Don Mills site in Toronto, has provoked widespread popular opposition. An extensive poll, results of which were released last week, found that 78 percent of residents in the Greater Toronto/Hamilton regions do not believe the Ford government's move to mothball the widely popular, publicly owned, not-for-profit educational facility was representative of the population's best interests.

Those respondents expressed concern about the cultural and educational impacts of the closure on the low-wage, working class, largely immigrant population who live nearby in the high-density north-eastern quadrant of Toronto and neighbouring Scarborough. Further, 86 percent of those polled cast doubt on Ford's plan to eventually move a much diminished version of a science center to the government's real estate boondoggle venture at the downtown waterfront Ontario Place "land renewal" project. Such is the growing opposition to Ford's fiat that even 50 percent of Conservative voters are skeptical of the government's motives.

And what exactly is this master plan for Ford's waterfront development project?

At the epicenter of one of the most expensive cities on the continent, Ford, in 2022, approved a private 95 year lease for Therme, an international luxury spa and waterpark operation, to anchor a development that will also feature a sailing marina, a LiveNation concert venue as well as other pay-entry lakeside amenities. As part of the deal, Therme has insisted on the construction of a 2,000-space parking lot built at taxpayers' expense conservatively costed at over \$307 million. Another \$200 million will be taken from the public purse for unexplained "site servicing" costs.

The Therme "ultimate relaxation retreat" was shepherded through the development stages by top lobbyist and long-time Conservative Party operative Leslie Noble who co-wrote former arch right-wing Ontario premier Mike Harris' "Common Sense Revolution" election platform that heralded a brutal decade of austerity in the province.

Therme will offer customers giant indoor swimming pools, an array of hot and wet "sauna experiences" each with "unique temperatures to suit your every mood." Customers will have the opportunity to access mineral pools, light therapies, other body

care opportunities and fashionable restaurants. Should a working class family of four take a wrong turn and enter the facility, a six hour pass with lunch has been costed out at \$479, parking included.

The Ford government, in its absolute cynicism, plans to move a downsized and eviscerated Ontario Science Centre to a spot adjacent to the Therme spa in order to justify its wrecking operation in North-East Toronto and its use of taxpayer monies to fund the development's parking lot. A citizen's group formed to examine Ford's plan charges that the projected taxpayer costs to subsidize the development could swell to over a billion dollars, with Therme investing only 30 percent of the total required. Already, casino companies have taken note of these subsidies as they eye their own possibilities in the vicinity.

While vast sums are shelled out to enrich well-connected corporate executives and shareholders, the fate of the Science Centre exemplifies the hard-right Ford government's sweeping attacks on budgets for education, culture and public services more broadly. As Ontario's schools fall apart and the teacher shortage grows, due to increasingly intolerable working conditions and population growth, the Ford government is intent on implementing billions of dollars in cuts to education spending over the next decade.

The entire affair further exposes the government's close ties to grasping real estate developers and corporate interests and more broadly the decades-long big business offensive to slash public sector expenditures that has been embraced by provincial governments of all political stripes.

The Ontario Science Centre, located on a sprawling, forested site, has been a world-renowned hub for science education since a pre-identified quasar radio-signal from over 1.5 billion light-years away activated a circuit in the building which opened the facility in 1969. One of the first hands-on, interactive science museums in the world, it has since been an attraction for more than 54 million children from across the province on school field trips or attending science summer camps as well as for inexpensive weekend outings with parents from the impoverished local neighbourhoods and beyond. Full semester credit programs for high school students offer more intensive scientific training. International tourists also flock to the site.

But on June 21, and without warning, Conservative

Infrastructure Minister Kinga Surma in a late Friday afternoon news release abruptly ordered the immediate closure of this international scientific jewel. The announcement was soon to ignite the smouldering opposition to Ford's downtown "renewal" plan into a rapidly spreading political wildfire.

Surma had claimed that a report from Rimkus Consulting Group, an engineering firm commissioned by the government, had cited possible danger to visitors and workers at the museum due to the discovery of "distressed, high risk" roof panels that could collapse if subjected to heavy snow loads. A new roof, claimed the minister, would cost between \$22 million and \$40 million and require at least two years of work during which the facility would need to be closed. Rather than lay out such expenditures, the Minister's office presented its order to immediately shutter the site, look for a temporary building to partially locate some exhibits, hopefully by 2026, before re-opening a new, smaller science museum, perhaps by 2028, as part of Ford's already suspect Ontario Place plan.

Shocked by the announcement, which also cost over 50 food workers their jobs, municipal authorities quickly dispatched a city building inspector to the site within hours of the museum's closure. That inspector did not report any immediate hazards. He noted that several critical-risk roof panels had already been secured. As more engineering experts were mobilized in the coming weeks by leading scientists and museum supporters, it became clear that the Ford government had misled the people of the province on the actual content of the Rimkus findings.

Nowhere in the government-commissioned Rimkus report was there a finding that the science center should be immediately closed. It noted that the building would be safe until October 31 and, should repairs in certain areas be continued, the risks outlined could be quickly eliminated. Three engineering experts independent of the government produced findings contradicting government roof mitigation estimates, stating that repair or replacement of the "high-risk" panels would cost about \$520,000 and be done with little to no interference with public areas.

A deep dive into the Rimkus report and three other reports by engineers who have examined the Rimkus findings is even more illuminating. Moriyama Teshima Architects, founded by the famous architect Raymond Moriyama, who designed the Ontario Science Centre, accused the government of abruptly and rashly closing the museum. "Repairs are needed," they wrote, "but on a manageable scale and with potentially minimal impact on the public experience." The company then offered its services free of charge to assist in the work. In addition, a number of philanthropists associated with the center offered several million dollars in donations to accomplish the repairs. The office of Minister Surma refused to answer reporters' questions on the matter.

As it turns out, of the 152,000 square feet of roof panelling, engineers found just six panels (each measuring 15 square feet) at critical risk, all of which have been repaired or replaced. In addition, 2 to 6 percent of roof panels were found to be at "high risk." Despite the government's position that visitor safety is of immense concern to them, none of the high-risk panels are over permanent exhibition areas and can be easily replaced.

The public scrutiny of the shuttering of the science center has raised larger issues regarding the safety of public buildings. The roof panels on the three science center buildings are made from Reinforced Autoclave Aerated Concrete (RAAC). The material, more thermally efficient than other cements, has been found to have an expected lifespan of 30 to 40 years and has been a major component in roof, wall and floor construction, particularly in large buildings from the 1950s until the mid-1990s when safety questions began to be raised about the long-term stability of the product.

By 2023, earlier British reports on the durability of the material could no longer be ignored. A study that year noted that hundreds of schools in the United Kingdom, along with the country's major airports, hospitals, social housing and even refurbished parts of the Houses of Parliament contain RAAC. Since last year, over a hundred schools are fully or partially closed. Another 450 are suspected for the presence of RAAC. Over a thousand other schools have yet to be inspected. The crisis state of much of the country's building infrastructure is a direct result of over 40 years of vicious cost-cutting in public sector building maintenance expenditures.

In Ontario, some 400 public buildings have been built with RAAC materials. No closures or amelioration programs have been ordered for any of them—except at the Ontario Science Centre. In 2023 an auditor-general's report cited years of government underfunding for the center as the cause of increased disrepair. Such underfunding, however, is not limited to the plight of the science center. Public buildings and schools across the province have for decades suffered from similar cuts.

The report also charged that the government's plan to relocate the center to Ontario Place was made with "preliminary and incomplete cost information" and without consulting key stakeholders. In fact, it has been subsequently shown by these key stakeholders that a sustained budget to replace the entire roof installation at the center over the coming years can be safely accomplished more cheaply than the hundreds of millions of taxpayer-funded "political cover" that Ford has earmarked to relocate the museum to his waterfront boondoggle.

Ford's attack on science and education and his cozy relationship with real estate developers will come as no surprise to many. The last few years alone have seen Ford caught in a far-reaching scandal to deliver protected green belt lands over to real estate developers. And ignoring the science around COVID public health protections, this summer he ended provincial funding for wastewater testing to track COVID-19 infection rates even as new and dangerous mutations of the virus continue to sicken, hospitalize and kill Ontarians.



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