

Legislative  
Assembly  
of Ontario



Assemblée  
législative  
de l'Ontario

# STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

## **VALUE-FOR-MONEY AUDIT: METROPOLITAN TORONTO CONVENTION CENTRE AND OTTAWA CONVENTION CENTRE**

(2023 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL OF  
ONTARIO)

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The Honourable Donna Skelly, MPP  
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly

Madam,

Your Standing Committee on Public Accounts has the honour to present its Report and commends it to the House.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Rakocevic".

Tom Rakocevic, MPP  
Chair of the Committee

Queen's Park  
March 2026



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## INTRODUCTION

On May 13, 2024, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts held public hearings on the performance audit of the Metropolitan Toronto Convention Centre and Rogers Centre Ottawa (*2023 Annual Report* of the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario), overseen by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming (formerly the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport).

The Committee endorses the Auditor's findings and recommendations, and presents its own findings, views, and recommendations in this report. The Committee requests that the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming provide the Clerk of the Committee with written responses to the recommendations within 120 calendar days of the tabling of this report with the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, unless otherwise specified.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Committee extends its appreciation to officials from the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming; the Metropolitan Toronto Convention Centre Corporation; and the Rogers Centre Ottawa. The Committee also acknowledges the assistance provided during the hearings and report-writing deliberations by the Office of the Auditor General, the Clerk of the Committee, and Legislative Research.

## BACKGROUND

Ontario's two provincially operated convention centres are the Metropolitan (or Metro) Toronto Convention Centre (MTCC) in Toronto, and the Rogers Centre Ottawa (called the Ottawa Convention Centre (OCC) or Shaw Centre during the audit and hearings).

Under their respective legislative mandates, the Toronto and Ottawa convention centres operate as individual Crown agencies that are overseen by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming (Ministry).

Both convention centres are located in urban downtown areas with access to hotels, transportation, tourist attractions, restaurants, and other amenities. The Auditor explains that convention centres are

designed to hold large-scale events ... such as conferences, trade shows, consumer shows, corporate events, as well as food and beverage events like banquets or wedding receptions. A typical convention centre is comprised of exhibition halls, meeting rooms and ballrooms, and may also offer amenities like hotels, restaurants and on-site parking.

With the potential to attract thousands of attendees to national and international events, convention centre events typically generate two types of financial impact: profits for the venue and economic benefits for the local economy. The Auditor explains that "governments usually operate convention centres for the purpose of stimulating economic activity in their regions, creating employment opportunities, spurring economic growth and generating tax revenue."

The audit found that “excluding the two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, over the past decade the two centres combined to generate, on average, an estimated \$600 million in economic impact per year. Their combined average annual operating profits totalled about \$20 million.”

## **AUDIT OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE**

According to the Auditor, the audit objective was

to assess whether the Ministry [of Tourism, Culture and Gaming] has effective processes and systems in place to oversee, monitor and report on the provincial convention centres on a timely basis, to ensure that they meet key legislative and policy requirements, as well as best practices for the operation of world-class convention centres [and to assess whether the Toronto convention centre and the Ottawa convention centre] each had effective processes and systems in place to:

- meet key legislative and policy requirements, and best practices for the operation of world-class convention centres that can host international events; and
- measure, evaluate, and publicly report on the centre’s effectiveness.

## **MAIN POINTS OF 2023 AUDIT**

The Auditor’s overall conclusions were that:

- The Ministry did not properly oversee the two centres to ensure they operated in a way that best achieved their respective mandates.
- Millions of dollars in potential economic impact have been lost while the centres focused on their individual profitability.
- Despite over \$40 million in provincial support for the convention centres during the pandemic to maintain operations, the convention centres “have not been adequately supported in their recovery” from the pandemic.
- The Toronto convention centre “faced challenges related to its aging facility ...its layout and the size of its exhibit and meeting spaces were not meeting the needs of large-scale events.” The Toronto convention centre “had proposed redevelopment of this centre to the Ministry, and was awaiting a response.”
- The Ottawa convention centre “was impacted by a significant decline in direct international flights to Ottawa, down about 53% from pre-pandemic levels. While governments in other jurisdictions were actively working with airlines to increase flight frequency, the Ministry was not providing support in this regard.”

- The audit noted that while each convention centre “reported on numerous performance metrics and generally achieved their performance targets” ... the Toronto centre’s “economic impact target was relatively less ambitious than its revenue growth target” and the Ottawa centre “did not start setting a target for the economic impact generated by the centre until 2018/19.”
- “Generally, both” convention centres “effectively managed their operations and facilities, satisfied the expectations of their clients and maintained economic efficiency.”

## **ISSUES RAISED IN THE AUDIT AND BEFORE THE COMMITTEE**

Ministry officials explained the actions they are taking to implement the Auditor General’s recommendations aimed at improving service delivery at the two convention centres. Consultations with the two agencies on developing economic impact targets and other issues will be part of the process for developing the 2025-26 letters of direction from the ministries to each agency.

The Committee heard that the Ministry is continuing discussions with the Toronto convention centre on a potential redevelopment of the centre. The Toronto convention centre is refining its business case for the redevelopment proposal to better reflect and align with current and post-pandemic conditions. The Ministry is also collaborating with Infrastructure Ontario to plan for an upcoming condition assessment for the Ottawa convention centre.

The Committee asked about the decision to lay off Ottawa convention centre staff during the pandemic and heard that the centre outsources its food and beverage operations, and the decision to lay off these staff was made by their third-party employer, not the centre.

The Toronto convention centre emphasized its “unwavering commitment” to “adhere to and exceed the standards set by the Auditor General’s recommendations,” and to focus on ensuring that the centre “continues to serve as a leading economic driver, attracting global events that spotlight Toronto and Ontario as a premier destination.”

The Ottawa convention centre also noted that it is taking a serious approach to implementing the Auditor General’s recommendations. This includes taking steps to improve the vibrancy of downtown Ottawa and increase the likelihood that the centre is selected to host more large-scale events. The Committee heard that in March 2024, the Province and the city of Ottawa collaborated on an agreement responding to the city’s particular challenges, with supports tailored to rebuilding the city’s economy and accelerating the revitalization of the downtown core while also prioritizing public safety.

The Committee notes that in the Auditor General’s report, event planners defined “vibrancy” as including a city’s restaurants, attractions, cultural offerings, and walkability in relation to the convention centre. The Committee agrees that these features—though often outside the control of the convention centres themselves—are critical to attracting large-scale events and should be treated as part of Ontario’s overall competitiveness strategy.

The Committee asked what the Ministry is doing to help the Toronto convention centre attract more large events. The Ministry explained that it is working with both convention centres to help in their recovery from the pandemic, and as part of the upcoming mandate reviews for both centres, the Ministry will look at how it partners with them. As part of this process, the Ministry will “look for inspiration and guidance from the success of other jurisdictions.”

The Committee concurs with the Auditor General’s finding that the convention centres’ operational priorities were not consistently aligned with their legislated purpose. The centres were not created to generate profit for their own operations but rather to promote Ontario and serve as public infrastructure that stimulates tourism, employment, and economic growth. Their strategic value lies in attracting large-scale events that bring new money into the provincial economy even if those events are not independently profitable to the centre itself. The Committee emphasizes that both convention centre governance decisions and Ministry oversight should reflect this public interest mandate and that performance frameworks, redevelopment planning and funding decisions should be guided accordingly.

The Committee also acknowledges that both convention centres have internal governance structures that have historically prioritized profitability. The Metropolitan Toronto Convention Centre Board adopted a commercial cost-recovery goal in 1984, and the Ottawa Convention Centre Board adopted a similar profit-oriented goal in 2012. These priorities were reinforced by perpetual annual financial obligations to the Province—\$2.5 million for MTCC and \$1 million for OCC—and by performance incentives tied to revenue rather than economic impact. While these practices are understandable given the financial pressures on the centres, the Committee emphasizes that they are not aligned with the legislated mandate to promote tourism and economic development, and should be addressed through revised oversight and performance frameworks.

The Committee notes the finding of the Auditor General that both convention centres did in some cases prioritize revenue generation over securing events with broader economic benefit. The Auditor General identified 97 lost event bids due to pricing strategies that emphasized profitability over economic impact with an estimated \$52 million in lost opportunity. The Committee emphasizes that competitive pricing aligned with the centres’ public mandate is a critical factor in securing events and maximizing provincial return on investment.

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## CONSOLIDATED LIST OF COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

1. The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming should reaffirm the legislated purpose of the convention centres as public economic infrastructure, and ensure that all governance, performance measurement, redevelopment, and funding frameworks reflect this strategic mandate.
2. The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming should work with each convention centre and its respective municipal government to:
  - a) establish a data collection initiative focusing on safety and visitor perceptions of safety in areas surrounding each convention centre to track crime rates, incidents and other safety-related metrics in collaboration with local law enforcement and municipalities;
  - b) survey visitors, event organizers and local stakeholders to measure perceptions of safety, and analyse how these perceptions impact tourism attendance and event bids;
  - c) correlate this collected safety data with economic outcomes such as event attendance, tourism spending, and event bids won or lost; and
  - d) collect data on other barriers to convention centre usage including but not limited to competitive pricing, accessibility, flight availability, and infrastructure quality.
3. The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming should work with each convention centre and their respective municipalities on strategies to increase the vibrancy (defined by event planners who spoke to the Auditor General as “a measure which includes a city’s restaurants, attractions, cultural offerings and its ‘walkability’ in relation to the convention centre”) of the downtown areas near each convention centre.
4. The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming should work with its federal counterparts to identify ways to increase direct flights to Ottawa.
5. The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming should work with the Toronto and Ottawa convention centres to
  - a) help each convention centre continue to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic;
  - b) support each convention centre in continuing to attract large-scale events;
  - c) plan for condition reassessments of each convention centre;
  - d) consider potential redevelopment of each convention centre; and

- e) review bidding and pricing strategies to ensure alignment with long-term economic impact objectives and to improve competitiveness in securing high-value events.
6. The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming should develop a coordinated strategy with the Metropolitan Toronto and Ottawa convention centres to enhance Ontario's competitiveness in the convention sector, including improvements to infrastructure, pricing flexibility, and event destination appeal.
  7. The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming should establish a mutually agreed-upon standard for what constitutes a timely Ministry response to proposals from the convention centres, including expectations for acknowledgement, evaluation, and decision-making timelines.