

## The Saint Louis Science Center and Planetarium

5050 Oakland Avenue

St. Louis, MO 63110

(314) 289-4400

<http://www.slsc.org>

### **Rating of Accessibility (out of 5 stars)**

Overall Rating: 4.35 stars

- Accessible by Metro's bus routes: 3.5 stars
- Docent Guides Upon Request: 5 stars
- Well Staffed and Well Supervised: 5 stars
- Tactile and Auditory Components: 4 stars (under further development)

This evaluation was last updated on September 13, 2012 by Stephen Kissel, Blind Community Enrichment Associate for the St. Louis Lighthouse for the Blind, with the assistance of Ms. Frieda Smith, SLSC Senior Director of Public Programs, Ms. Suzanne Walton, former SLSC Early Childhood Programs Manager, her successor, Ms. Melisa Thomas, Mr. John Lakey, Director of the James S. McDonald Planetarium, Ms. Anna Green, and Ms. Debra Bush, SLSC Volunteer.

As with the City Museum and the Magic House, the Saint Louis Science Center and Planetarium are full of hands-on activities, and although the facility is mostly geared towards young kids, older teens and adults are likely to also find interest in many of the featured attractions. From the Earth's geological layers to the distant stars and planets, this dual museum explores the various realms of science and astronomy in a wide array of interactive and immersive activities. Many of these activities are already accessible for visitors who are blind or visually impaired, and developments continue to yield new interactive features that would enhance a sight-impaired individual's overall experience at the Saint Louis Science Center and Planetarium. Nevertheless, this popular tourist attraction remains one at which a sighted companion will prove indispensable to blind or visually impaired visitors.

From Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day weekend, visitors can catch the Forest Park Trolley from the Metro Link station on DeBaliviere to the main entrance of the Science Center. In addition, Metro has regular year-round bus stops on Oakland, Kingshighway, and Hampton (the Number 59, Number 95, and Number 90 buses respectively). Riders should obtain more specific walking directions before traveling in order to judge which route would best meet the individual's needs and level of confidence in independent traveling. As usual, cabs, Metro's

Call-A-Ride service, and other sighted drivers will leave passengers within an easy walking distance of the main entrance on Oakland. Admission to the Science Center is free, but visitors wishing to explore special touring exhibits, attend a film at the Omni-MAX Theater, or visit the Planetarium should anticipate additional costs for admission into these special areas.

Upon first entering, the visitor will instantly encounter an overwhelming bustle of auditory activity in the main lobby. Do not panic; this is completely normal. You have just entered a spacious lobby with several entrances to featured galleries, multiple ticket booths, ample quantities of energetic youth, and an elaborate elevated ball track. Fortunately, greeters are always stationed directly inside the front entrance, and they are more than happy to point visitors in the right direction. In addition, the help desk is located directly inside the main entrance, serving as a convenient location at which to inquire about special exhibits and amenities or at which to rendezvous with one's group or tour guide.

Currently, Sighted Guide assistance is highly recommended for all blind or visually impaired visitors, regardless of whether that service is being provided by a relative, friend, or SLSC staff member. Although the spacious hallways are easy to navigate, the passages are very wide; there is rarely a single, obvious path through the museum or its galleries; they are often crowded; and a blind or visually impaired visitor could very easily feel overwhelmed at the amount of possible activities and exhibitions. It is also worth noting that the restrooms, restaurant menus, and other basic amenities lack Braille signage, so soliciting sighted assistance is ultimately essential in navigating the building in its current state. Sight impaired groups, as well as individual visitors, may call in advance to arrange for an SLSC staff member to serve as a sighted guide through the facility's many exhibits, shows, and attractions. Overall, visitors will find the site's staff extremely friendly and helpful in making one's visit as enjoyable as possible. As the facility strives to constantly improve its accessibility to all visitors, individual feedback is always appreciated, and the staff works hard to make each visit to the Science Center a truly unique experience.

The Science Center has numerous exhibits which range in topics from dinosaurs to the Earth's layers to the human body, and many of these exhibitions contain tactile and auditory components that greatly enhance a blind or visually impaired individual's experience. This is achieved by allowing visitors to explore certain exhibits in ways that require the use of multiple senses. For example, in the dinosaur exhibition, visitors will find tactile components such as a life-sized cast of a brontosaurus' toenail, a rubber imitation of a Tyrannosaurus rex's scales, and small dinosaur toys. The large robotic T-rex (a signature trademark of the Science Center) moves and roars throughout the day. The exhibition on the planet Earth also has an earthquake simulator and a machine-made cyclone which can be felt. These are features which are fun for kids to experience, and the inclusion of such tactile and auditory components greatly help blind and visually impaired individuals to more fully comprehend, explore, and appreciate the many displays and attractions.

The Discovery Room and the Life Sciences Lab, among other galleries, contain even more hands-on experiments and puzzles that, with some sighted guidance for instruction, are wonderful for sight-impaired youth. These interactive galleries deal with topics ranging from architecture to the human body to microscopic organisms. Whether it's creating a foam model of the Gateway Arch, examining the human skeleton, or being tested for fingerprints, blind and visually impaired individuals will thoroughly enjoy exploring these galleries. Most sight

impaired visitors will still need additional assistance in reading the instructions and fun facts on the signs or large touch screens at each station, but most of the activities are extremely blind-friendly. Visitors will encounter similar issues within the human body exhibition and the planet Earth exhibition. As in the Discovery Room, most of these issues involve brightly colored pictures on the wall or information displayed on computer monitors. Although visually impaired individuals may be able to make out some of the main features and basic information, totally blind visitors will need sighted assistance to provide physical descriptions of the displays and their accompanying text.

A variety of enhancements have already been implemented over the past two years in both the Discovery Room and the Life Sciences Lab to further enhance their universal accessibility. The Discovery Room's tactile fossil display is now equipped with new Braille labels to identify each skeleton cast, and new tinted windows have been installed to cut down on excessive amounts of both glare and heat, making the gallery more comfortable for everyone. Low vision individuals will also notice new yellow caution tape on the Science Center's main stairwell as a means of clearly identifying the edge of each step. Furthermore, most of the galleries are now also equipped with state-of-the-art iPads, allowing sight impaired visitors easier access to additional information and activities in the Science Center. Low-vision individuals will be able to use the iPads to gain a closer look at the text in a magnification size that meets their needs, and totally blind users will be able to browse the information using Apple's Voice Over application, placing vast amounts of information at the visitor's fingertips. Additional proposals for blind-friendly enhancements to the Science Center galleries have been drafted and will be implemented over the coming years as resources and funding become available.

Throughout the year, the Science Center hosts a variety of special traveling exhibitions. These have included exhibits on the Titanic, Marvel Comics, candy, the circus, pirates, and a Dinosaur Named Sue. Generally, these exhibits feature technology (e.g. audio tours), tactile components, and other hands-on activities that help make the exhibit very accessible to all visitors. These special exhibits require an additional admission fee, but it is well worth it for the amount of enjoyment and enrichment that can be obtained by sighted and non-sighted youth and adults.

A unique trademark of the Saint Louis Science Center is the Omni-MAX Theater, an IMAX movie screen in the shape of a dome. Featured films are typically documentary-styled films that explore a wide variety of topics. These include global landscapes, outer space, flight, sea creatures, and even roller coasters. The unique size and shape of the screen creates the illusion that the viewer is right in the middle of the picture and is actually visiting and experiencing what is depicted on the screen. Low-vision individuals should have little trouble taking in the captivating and breath-taking visuals and scenery, but totally blind individuals may find themselves at somewhat of a disadvantage. Currently, descriptive audio for the blind is not available at the Omni-MAX Theater, although it remains a long-term goal for the museum. If the subject matter of the current film interests the visitor, blind individuals should not be discouraged from viewing the pictures, for they often include equally fascinating narration and auditory components that also serve to immerse the viewer in the world depicted on screen.

A covered walkway over the highway connects the Saint Louis Science Center with the adjacent James S. McDonald Planetarium. Currently, the Planetarium is not nearly as accessible

as the rest of the facility's attractions. However, major enhancements are being developed for permanent installation during 2013 and 2014 to coincide with the Planetarium's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. These new features will include an entirely new make-over for the facility's signature star show, "The Little Star that Could." Through a combination of synchronized Descriptive Video Service, tactile models, and Braille star charts, blind and visually impaired visitors will be able to explore the night sky and its countless celestial bodies in new dimensions. Activities involving temperature and texture will teach visitors about the life-span and key characteristics of different types of stars. Braille labels will be added to key displays, and tactile models of various spacecrafts on display will be crafted, bringing the heavens down to a level newly accessible for both sighted and non-sighted visitors alike. A few tactile components within the Planetarium already exist, including a rather large model of the surface of Mars and an entire wall display featuring casts of hand prints of famous astronauts, but it is hoped that the forthcoming enhancements will stimulate renewed local enthusiasm for a topic that is often stereotyped as a strictly visual field of exploration.

In the spring of 2010, a joint partnership developed between the Saint Louis Science Center and the St. Louis Lighthouse for the Blind. The goal of this new partnership is to closely evaluate the Science Center, Omni-MAX Theater, and Planetarium on a room by room basis in terms of accessibility to blind or visually impaired visitors. Informational, technological, and financial resources will be investigated and pooled in order to develop new ways of making the facility's attractions enjoyable and engaging for sight-impaired visitors. The 2013 scheduled enhancements in the James S. McDonald Planetarium mark the first large-scale fruits of this partnership. More information will be made available as developments progress.

Additional information concerning the key events and attractions can be found on the Science Center's website. However, whereas low-vision individuals using screen enlarging software will encounter minimal difficulty in navigating the website, totally blind individuals will find the site less accessible. This is largely due to the lack of headings, frequent repetition of multiple groups of links, and non-descriptive alternative text such as "Click here for more information." Blind individuals using screen reading software such as Jaws for Windows will also wish to solicit sighted assistance or call the Omni-MAX Theater directly when inquiring about show times, for the times and show titles are difficult to correctly match when using screen reading software. If problems persist, one can always call the Science Center during regular business hours, using the phone number provided at the beginning of this evaluation.

For any further general inquiries on exhibits, visiting attractions, current services, or upcoming additions, please contact:

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