

Alto (high-speed rail)

Alto (stylized in all caps), also known as the **Toronto–Quebec City High-Speed Rail Network**,^[3] is a planned privately-operated^{[4][5]} high-speed rail network in Canada that will connect Quebec City to Toronto. It was announced by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on February 19, 2025. A design phase for the project was announced with an estimated cost of \$3.9 billion and is expected to last 4 to 5 years, with the total cost estimated at \$60 billion to \$90 billion.^[6] The line will be built in phases with the first phase to be the segment between Ottawa and Montreal.

The railway will feature trains that will reach top speeds of up to 300 km/h (186 mph), nearly double that of Via Rail's current fastest services, which have a maximum operating speed of 160 km/h (100 mph).^[a] The rail network is planned to consist of approximately 1,000 kilometres (620 mi) of new passenger-dedicated electrified track,^{[7][8]} and is expected by the Alto team to be fully complete in 2043.^[4] It will be owned by the federal Crown corporation also named Alto who will determine the required outcomes for the project and co-design the rail service.

History

Background

Several studies for Canadian high-speed rail have been created over the decades, but no project advanced to the design phase. In November 2022, the Canadian government announced the planning of a "high-frequency rail (HFR)" line on the Quebec City–Windsor Corridor. This project

Alto



Overview

Service type	<u>High-speed rail</u>
Status	Planned
Locale	<u>Greater Toronto Area</u> <u>Peterborough</u> <u>National Capital Region</u> <u>Laval</u> <u>Montreal</u> <u>Mauricie</u> <u>Capitale-Nationale (Quebec)</u>
First service	Construction (estimate): Starting 2029–2030 Opening (estimate): 2035–2038 (phase 1) 2041–2044 (full)
Current operator	Cadence consortium (planned)

Route

Termini	<u>Toronto</u> <u>Quebec City</u>
Stops	7
Distance travelled	1,000 km (620 mi)

Technical

Operating speed	300 km/h (186 mph) ^[1]
Track owner	<u>Canadian Government</u>
	Company
Company type	<u>Subsidiary</u>
Founded	November 29, 2022 ^[2]
Headquarters	<u>Montreal, Quebec, Canada</u>

was called Via HFR.^[9] Via HFR was founded as a Crown corporation on November 29, 2022,^[2] under the official company name Via HFR – Via TGF and as a subsidiary of Via Rail,^[10] to

Parent	<u>Via Rail Canada Inc.</u>
Website	<u>www.altotrain.ca/en</u> (https://www.altotrain.ca/en)

"oversee what was initially pitched as a 'high frequency' rail project".^[11] Its headquarters was chosen to be Montreal and the President and CEO of the Montreal Port Authority Martin Imbleau was later chosen to be its CEO.^[12] The High Frequency Rail project would have involved constructing 1000 km of passenger-dedicated electrified track, with trains that travelled at average speeds of up to 200 km/h.^[13] The chosen private development partner would have designed, constructed, financed, operated, and maintained the high frequency rail service as well as existing local services.^[14]

Announcement

Alto was officially announced by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in Montreal on February 19, 2025. It was announced as a revision of the Via HFR project, which was to now be a high-speed rail line from Quebec City to Toronto.^[9] The public entity known as Via HFR was renamed to Alto, and its responsibilities were set as defining the desired project outcomes, performing project management, and co-designing the system.^[3] Via Rail was assigned the role of providing advice on the technical and operational aspects of existing passenger railway services in the Quebec City–Windsor Corridor.^[15]

The federal government chose the design, construction, financing, operation, and maintenance of the rail network—also named Alto—to be the responsibility of the private Cadence consortium (which includes the French state-owned rail operator SNCF Voyageurs and the private airline Air Canada) after an open bidding process.^{[11][16]} The Canadian government will retain ownership of the Alto corporation, Via Rail, and all new and existing assets built through the project.^[17] In the announcement, Trudeau described the project as the "largest infrastructure project in Canadian history" and added that it would be "a game-changer for Canadians". The line is to span Toronto and Quebec City, with five stops in between: Peterborough, Ottawa, Montreal, Laval, and Trois-Rivières.^[18]

Development

Once Cadence was selected as the private development partner (PDP), the Alto project entered the co-development phase. During this phase, the project will move through four pre-construction stages, gradually increasing the level of development. Stage 1 will consist of initial agreement between the PDP and Alto, Stage 2 will include determining the preferred track alignment, Stage 3 will involve developing designs for routes between multiple pairs of cities, and Stage 4 will involve progressing the design of the overall system to 50% completion. The approach of designing route segments between pairs of cities was chosen to reduce the risk of project delays and to enable useful service without needing the entire line to be complete.^[19]

On September 14, 2025, an initial list of "nation-building" projects was announced by the federal government, and Alto was not one of them. In an interview, Alto's CEO Martin Imbleau said that he expected that Alto would make it onto a future list of priority projects once development advances further. He reiterated that phased construction is expected to start in 2029 or 2030, with the first of

four route segments being completed 6–8 years after construction starts and the entire network being finished in 12–14 years (2041–2044).^[20] On December 12, 2025, the federal government announced that the first phase of Alto would be between the cities of Ottawa and Montreal.^[1]

Stations

The Alto high-speed rail network was announced to have stops in seven cities, with no other stops currently being developed.^[21]



All stations are in the Quebec City–Windsor Corridor.

Province	City	Metro population (2021)	Rank
Ontario	Toronto	6,202,225	1
	Peterborough	128,624	32
	Ottawa	1,488,307	4
Quebec	Montreal	4,291,732	2
	Laval		
	Trois-Rivières	161,489	28
	Quebec City	839,311	7

Bidding process

Participating consortia

In July 2023, the government selected three consortia to proceed to the request-for-proposals (RFP) stage for what was then known as the High Frequency Rail project:^{[22][23][24][25]}

Cadence (winner)

- Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec (CDPQ Infra) (Canada)
- AtkinsRéalis Group (formerly known as SNC-Lavalin) (Canada)
- SYSTRA Canada (France)
- Keolis Canada (France/Canada)
- Air Canada (Canada)
- SNCF Voyageurs (France)

Intercity Rail Developers

- Intercity Development Partners (Canada)
- Kilmer Transportation (Canada)
- First Rail Holdings (United Kingdom)
- Jacobs (United States)
- Hatch (Canada)
- CIMA+ (Canada)
- FirstGroup (United Kingdom)
- RATP Dev Canada (France/Canada)
- Renfe Operadora (Spain)
- Meridiam (France)
- DF Canada Infrastructure Group (Canada)
- EllisDon Capital (Canada)

Partenaires Ferroviaires Qconnexion Rail Partners

- Fengate (Canada)
- John Laing (United Kingdom)
- Bechtel (United States)
- WSP Canada (Canada)
- Deutsche Bahn (Germany)

Winning consortium (Cadence)

On February 19, 2025, the winning consortium was announced to be Cadence after a multi-year procurement process.^{[26][27]} The consortium members expressed their pride and excitement at being selected while promoting their respective areas of expertise.^[28] Cadence will co-design, build, finance, operate, and maintain the Alto project.^[29]

Travel times

Official estimated/planned travel times by Alto and comparison to other modes, including the current Via Rail Quebec City–Windsor Corridor service:^[30]

Route	Alto	Via Rail	Flying ^[nb 1]	Driving
Toronto–Ottawa	2:09	4:26	2:56 (0:56)	~4:30
Toronto–Montreal	3:07	5:30	3:08 (1:08)	~5:30
Toronto–Peterborough	0:40	—	—	~1:30
Ottawa–Montreal	0:58	1:59	2:42 (0:42)	~2:00
Montreal–Quebec City	1:29	3:17	2:47 (0:47)	~3:00
Montreal–Trois-Rivières	0:50	—	—	~1:30

- Flying times include the recommended 2 hour early arrival to the airport for domestic flights by the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority (CATSA).^{[31][32]} The flying times in brackets are the average airport to airport times including takeoff and landing.^[33]
 - Train and flying times do not include travel time from suburbs to stations/airports or vice versa.
 - Current Via Rail trains (Siemens Charger locomotives and Venture cars) have a design top speed of 200 km/h (125 mph) but have a maximum operating speed of 160 km/h (100 mph) due to infrastructure limitations.
 - Driving times are based on average conditions and typical routes. Actual travel times may vary depending on traffic, weather, and road conditions.

Alto's average speed

With the route from Toronto to Montreal via Ottawa being approximately 610 km (380 mi) long, Alto high-speed trains will make the 3-hour trip at an average speed of approximately 196 km/h (122 mph) including stops at stations. This is a slower and longer trip compared to that in a study done by Via Rail, which estimated a Toronto–Montreal trip time of 2 hours 15 minutes and corresponding average speed of 271 km/h (assuming a maximum speed of 350 km/h).^[4]

For comparison, Amtrak's Acela service operates at an average speed of 132 km/h (82 mph) between New York City and Washington, D.C. (its fastest segment),^{[34][35]} while SNCF Voyageurs operates the LGV Est, a TGV service at an average speed of 279 km/h (173 mph) between the Reims area and the Metz-Nancy region.^{[36][37]}

Benefits

By travelling at speeds of up to 300 km/h (186 mph) on dedicated passenger tracks, the planned Alto high-speed rail project would reduce travel times between Toronto and Montreal to approximately three hours. This lies in the ideal time range to make rail journeys attractive and to allow for frequent trips.^[38] Low-cost tickets and frequent service could attract enough passengers for intermediary stations to be built to serve commuters. This could expand access to affordable housing in small towns, while trips between the major cities could remain fast by running non-stop and express service, in response to market demand.^[38]

Constructing high-speed rail between Toronto and Quebec City is expected to deliver 50,000 jobs over ten years and \$15–27 billion in economic benefits over 60 years.^{[30][39]} The rail network's use of electrified track will reduce emissions from car and air trips in the Toronto–Quebec City corridor, helping Canada to meet its climate goals.^[3] The Government of Canada will require the Cadence consortium to deliver minimum project outcomes, including "producing a significant modal shift to passenger rail; providing barrier-free access to services according to the latest accessibility standards; and improved on-time performance across the Corridor."^[3] Additionally, the entry of high speed rail into regional transportation markets typically results in improved on-time flight performance, service quality, and price competition.^[40]

Criticism

The project's public-private partnership (P3) structure has been criticized for increasing the risk of project difficulties and reducing the potential benefits of the proposed high-speed line, compared to a line fully owned and operated by a public entity.^{[4][41][42]} A private operator will want to increase ticket prices to maximize profitability, which would limit the number of travellers switching from driving and air travel to rail travel. With most high-speed rail lines losing money,^[43] maintaining low ticket prices could require taxpayers to subsidize the profits of the private operator.^[41]

At an estimated cost of \$60 billion to \$120 billion,^{[6][44]} some claim that the Alto high-speed rail project will be significantly more expensive than similarly long high-speed lines elsewhere in the world.^{[42][45]} The per-kilometre cost of Alto will be more than double the average cost for high-speed rail construction in Europe, which has itself been found to be excessive by the European Court of Auditors.^[4] The Alto project's cost is more than five times the conservative estimate in a previous study for high-speed rail between Toronto and Montreal.^{[46][47]} Given Alto's high estimated costs and planned 18-year timeline for completion,^[4] investment in urban public transit and the existing Via Rail network has been proposed as a more cost-effective target for public funding to reduce transportation emissions and improve mobility.^{[42][48][49]}

Large infrastructure projects in Canada often experience uncertainty and delays,^[50] partly due to an overreliance on P3 projects and a lack of public sector project management expertise.^[51] Two of the partners in the awarded consortium, AtkinsRéalis (formerly known as SNC Lavalin) and CDPQ Infra, are responsible for rail projects that have encountered delays, cost-overruns, and technical problems. AtkinsRéalis is responsible for the delayed Ottawa LRT's Confederation Line expansion, while CDPQ

Infra was responsible for the now-cancelled REM de l'Est light rail extension as well as the wider REM network.^[41] Due to CDPQ Infra's privatization of public infrastructure for the REM light rail network, it is "highly unlikely" that the Alto high-speed train will be able to access Montreal's downtown public transit hub of Central Station, forcing commuters to travel longer or make more transfers to get to their destination.^[42]

Unlike France or Japan, where a public body performs expert-led oversight and its own project management, the Cadence consortium will be collectively responsible for delivering the Alto high-speed rail project. This may cause inefficiencies in project delivery and drive up the overall costs.^[52] In addition, legal issues and an overemphasis on public consultation may cause Alto to run into similar schedule and cost problems as the California High-Speed Rail (CAHSR) project, which has been delayed from a 2020 completion date, has had its route shrunk significantly from its original plans, and has had its estimated cost increase from US\$30 billion to US\$128 billion.^{[44][52][53]} A lack of national standards, expertise, workforce development, and political will could also result in the experience of California High-Speed Rail being repeated.^{[54][48]}

As of 2025, Via Rail uses revenue from the corridor to subsidize rail services in the rest of Canada, and the loss of this revenue to a private, for-profit operator under the Alto P3 structure could "profoundly compromise" Via Rail's ability to maintain services elsewhere in Canada.^{[41][5]} The private consortium would be incentivized to reduce labour costs by terminating obstructive union agreements when they come up for renewal, and any changes in Alto's schedules, stations, or routes would have to be negotiated with the private consortium, potentially resulting in costly litigation.^[41]

Notes

- a. Via's Siemens Charger locomotives and Venture cars are capable of 200 km/h speeds but are limited to 160 km/h in service.

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