Media backgrounder

Eastern Ontario communities raise alarm over proposed ALTO high-speed rail

Version 3 — July 31, 2026

Coalition for Better Rail

We are the Coalition for Better Rail. We believe Canada needs better intercity rail. But we also believe Canadians deserve to know what the Alto project will really cost, what impacts it could have and whether better options exist. We think they do.

About the Alto project

In February 2025, the federal government announced Alto, a plan to build a high-speed rail line from Toronto to Quebec City. The line would run about 1,000 kilometres and carry trains at up to 300 kilometres per hour. The published cost estimate is $60 to $90 billion. No one outside the government has reviewed that number.

Public consultation began in January 2026. It was only at that point that the full range of study corridors became publicly visible, including the southern corridor, which had not previously been presented as part of the project's study options.

Between Peterborough and Ottawa, planners are studying three route options. A northern route would cross the Canadian Shield through Lanark, Frontenac and Hastings Counties. A southern route would run closer to Highway 401 through farmland in Lennox and Addington County and Frontenac County. Then, on June 22, 2026, the federal transport minister announced that Alto has been directed to study a third option, running even further south, potentially along the 401, with a possible stop in or near Kingston. In each case, the government named the route before completing the studies needed to justify it.

Who is speaking up

Concern about the Alto project extends across Eastern Ontario and elsewhere along the proposed Toronto–Québec City corridor. Municipal and upper-tier governments, federal and provincial elected representatives, major agricultural organizations, conservation and environmental organizations, researchers, landowners and community groups have publicly opposed aspects of the current plan, raised significant concerns or called for alternatives to be considered.

The positions are not all the same. Some oppose Alto or particular proposed corridors; others have raised concerns about farmland, environmental impacts, expropriation, community severance, cost, consultation and transparency. What is significant is the breadth of the response. Public motions, resolutions and statements have now come from numerous municipalities and counties, MPs representing affected communities, and provincial representatives — including a July 29 joint statement from 11 Eastern Ontario PC MPPs raising concerns about the project.

Major agricultural organizations including the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, Beef Farmers of Ontario and National Farmers Union–Ontario have also raised concerns, alongside conservation, environmental, watershed, heritage and community organizations across the corridor.

The Citizen Research Initiative has filed 43 research papers with the public consultation process so far, covering cost, the environment, community impacts and alternatives, and continues to produce new research.

Eastern Ontario has been one of the most active and well-documented regions raising concerns about this project, but it is not the only one. The growing public record reflects a much broader debate about the route, cost, impacts and justification for the current Alto high-speed rail plan.

What the routes would cross

The southern route would cross some of the most sensitive land in Eastern Ontario. It would cut through the Frontenac Arch UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, which scientists recognize as the most ecologically rich land region in Canada, where five major forest types meet. It would also cross the Napanee Limestone Plain, a rare landscape shaped by the erosion of limestone, and the Moira, Napanee and Salmon River watersheds. The route would cross more than 1,000 public and private roads along the existing corridor. Based on what has happened with similar projects in other countries, between 300 and 600 of those crossings would be permanently closed. The original two study corridors included no planned train station anywhere between Peterborough and Ottawa. Every community the line passes through would pay a price and receive nothing in return.

The northern route takes a straighter path across the Canadian Shield through Lanark, Frontenac and Hastings Counties. The rock there is among the hardest in Eastern Ontario. Building through it would require heavy blasting and produce millions of tonnes of waste rock. The route runs through cottage country and recreational land that supports a real tourism economy. No stations are planned along the northern corridor either. People living along the route would absorb years of construction disruption and receive no train service. Awareness of the project and its potential impacts remains limited across many communities along both study corridors.

The June 22 announcement in Kingston pushed a third option further south than either of the two earlier routes. It would cross land that has not yet been assessed for environmental, community or engineering risks. This option includes a potential station in or near Kingston, distinguishing it from the earlier study corridors and introducing new community, environmental and engineering questions. The pattern remains the same: announce first, study later.

The next round of public consultation on the Peterborough to Ottawa section is scheduled for 2027.

Better options exist

We are not arguing against better intercity rail. We are arguing for smarter choices.

For example, upgrades to the existing rail corridor would allow trains to run at up to 200 kilometres per hour. This approach would cut travel times, cost far less, and avoid routing a permanent industrial fence through the Frontenac Arch Biosphere Reserve. Our modelling shows that the cost gap between the Alto plan and this approach comes roughly 46 percent from harder engineering and 53 percent from community resistance, both of which are much lower for the upgrade option. Riders care most about three things: reliable service, affordable tickets and available seats. A well-run upgraded corridor delivers all three. A maximalist high-speed project sets fares high to help cover decades of debt, which keeps riders away.

This follows from what happened elsewhere, for example, in Sweden, which spent nearly 20 years and billions of dollars planning a high-speed rail line from Gothenburg to Stockholm. In 2023, the government cancelled it. The Swedish National Audit Office found that cost estimates were too low, ridership forecasts could not hold up to scrutiny, and the extra costs of building in a cold climate had been ignored. These are the same problems we see with Alto. After cancelling the project, Sweden shifted to targeted upgrades of the existing network and delivered real improvements at a fraction of the cost. Canada can make that same choice now, before committing to construction, rather than after.

What still needs to be done

None of the following studies have been completed, yet all of them should happen before any route is chosen:

- An independent cost review using a rigorous quality-assurance process, similar to what Norway requires for all major public projects
- A health impact study covering emergency response times if rural roads are closed

- A full plant and animal survey meeting federal Species at Risk Act requirements
- A road-crossing study showing which of the 1,000-plus crossings would be bridged and which would be permanently closed
- A water study covering the Moira, Napanee and Salmon River systems
- A plan showing how much electricity the project needs and where it will come from
- An archaeological review of historic cemeteries and burial sites along the corridor

This backgrounder is a living document

We will update this backgrounder regularly as research grows. New papers on costs, engineering risks, environmental impacts and community concerns are in progress. All of CRI's research is free to read and download. Media and policymakers who want to be told when new research comes out are welcome to contact us directly.

Media contacts

You can contact the Coalition for Better Rail via email, coalitionforbetterrail@gmail.com

About us

The Coalition for Better Rail is an advocacy organization that supports evidence-based investment in intercity rail in Canada. We believe high performance rail on upgraded existing corridors offers Canadians a faster, cheaper and less destructive path to better train service than the Alto proposal. Learn more at beyondalto.ca.

KEY ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Alto's Political Support Is Now Uncertain

Reports suggest Ontario supported the Alto high-speed rail project in exchange for Ottawa allowing an expansion of Billy Bishop Airport. Ottawa has now dropped the airport expansion plan, raising questions about whether Ontario's support for Alto will continue.

The reported agreement has not been publicly confirmed, but multiple news reports describe a connection between the two projects. Soon after Ottawa's decision on the airport, Ontario said it was reviewing its position on Alto.

The central concern is accountability. If support for one major project was connected to another, the public deserves to know how that change affects Alto and the communities along the route.

This matters because Alto cannot move forward in Ontario without the province and municipalities helping with land access, road crossings, utilities, and other approvals. If Ontario's support was linked to the airport expansion, communities along the rail route need to know what happens next.

There are also questions about how public concerns are being considered. Ottawa said more than 87,000 people responded to the Billy Bishop consultation and used that feedback in its decision. For Alto, however, the government reported how many people participated but did not show how many raised specific concerns or how those concerns affected decisions.

The issue is about more than two projects. Alto and Billy Bishop both affect communities and require public trust. Residents, municipalities, and landowners along the rail corridor are asking for the same transparency and consideration given to other major public decisions.

Key questions remain:

- Does Ontario still support Alto now that the airport expansion is no longer moving forward?
- What commitments are still in place between the federal and provincial governments?
- Will communities affected by Alto have the same voice in decisions that affect them?

Source: "A Deal That Lost Its Other Half." *The Canadian High-Speed Rail Files* (Substack), July 2026. Available at: https://citizenresearch.ca/post-consultation/a-deal-that-lost-its-other-half/

Canada's Joint Project Office is put down and Alto is born

Canada's Joint Project Office (JPO) was created in 2019 as a partnership between the Canada Infrastructure Bank and VIA Rail to develop the High Frequency Rail (HFR, a faster and more frequent train) project. Although the government funded the JPO to advance HFR, its mandate did not allow it to consider high-speed rail as an alternative.

As the project developed, key decisions departed from the JPO's analysis. A presentation was used in place of a full business case at an important approval stage and the government chose electrification even though the JPO found diesel to be the lower-cost option. Disagreements between VIA Rail and the Canada Infrastructure Bank over how to procure the project led to senior government intervention.

In 2021, the government publicly announced the project's next steps before a formal business case had been completed. Shortly after the federal election, responsibility for the project was transferred from the JPO to Transport Canada, effectively ending the joint-venture governance model.

The JPO's final Business Case Update, completed in December 2021, estimated a capital cost of $27.71 billion, a negative net present value of $21.1 billion, and a benefit-cost ratio of about 0.13. The report was submitted before the financial review was complete and without full committee approval. It did not assess the public-private partnership model the government later adopted.

The JPO was subsequently dissolved, its functions were absorbed into Transport Canada and the project evolved into Alto. In 2025, the government signed an agreement with Cadence to develop a 300 km/h high-speed rail line, a project that had not been evaluated in the original business case, which the government now considers outdated.

Source: Durant, Erin. "The JPO is put down and Alto is born: The untold story of the life and death of the JPO." *The Canadian High-Speed Rail Files* (Substack), July 28, 2026. Available at: https://thealtofiles.substack.com/p/the-jpo-is-put-down-and-alto-is-born

Canadians are being asked to support a historic infrastructure project without having a full picture of its costs, benefits and risks.

Alto is expected to become the most expensive infrastructure project in Canadian history, but many key details about the project have not been made public.

Important agreements, including those that define responsibilities, costs, risks, and commitments with private and provincial partners, remain unavailable. Without this information, the public cannot clearly see who is accountable for decisions or cost increases.

The project also changed from high frequency rail (HFR) to a 300 km/h high-speed rail system, with an estimated cost of $60 billion to $90 billion. The government has not released a clear comparison showing why the higher-cost option was chosen or provided a new business case for the current project.

Concerns have been raised by municipalities, residents, farmers, businesses, transportation groups, academics and elected officials, who are calling for more information about costs, agreements, impacts and decision-making.

For a project of this size, the public should be able to understand who is responsible, why major decisions were made and how costs and risks will be managed.

Source: Durant, Erin. "What Alto and Canada Have Not Revealed." *The Canadian High-Speed Rail Files* (Substack), July 8, 2026.

High Frequency Rail: What the Government Said Back in 2023

When Transport Canada launched its search for a company to help build High Frequency Rail (HFR) in early 2023, officials didn't rule out high-speed rail. As part of the Request for Qualifications process, private companies bidding on the project were encouraged to study whether certain parts of the Québec City–Toronto route could handle high-speed trains, with the goal of adding high-speed sections "where there will be the greatest impact and benefit to Canadians."

At the same time, the government laid out specific downsides of building a full, end-to-end high-speed system:

- **Cost and time**: A complete high-speed line would cost far more and take much longer to build than HFR.
- **A fully separated corridor**: True high-speed rail needs a fenced-off, double-tracked route with no crossings, meaning bridges or tunnels wherever the tracks meet a road.
- **Over 1,000 existing crossings** along the corridor would all need to be rebuilt or removed to allow high-speed trains through safely.
- **More disruption to communities and the environment**, since a straighter, faster route would cut through more land and displace more people than the HFR plan.
- **Fewer stops for smaller communities**, since high-speed rail favours straight, fast routes over serving regional centres along the way.

In short, the government's early stance wasn't a flat "no" to high-speed rail, rather, it was closer to "let's find out where it makes sense." Bidders were invited to propose high-speed segments, while the government spelled out exactly what a full high-speed build would cost and disrupt.

That early openness, paired with a specific list of costs and construction challenges, is worth keeping in mind when comparing it to how the project has been discussed since.

Source: Transport Canada, "15. High Frequency Rail," briefing document for TRAN Committee Appearance on Main Estimates 2023-2024 and Supplementary Estimates (C) 2022-2023, March 7, 2023. https://tc.canada.ca/en/binder/15-high-frequency-rail-0

The $90 Billion Decision Nobody Can See

What happened: In a government records Access-to-Information request for five government documents about Canada's high-speed rail plan, most of the pages are blacked out (redacted), but what's left reveals some big problems.

- **Costs have exploded.** The project was first estimated at about $5.3–5.8 billion in 2019. By December 2021, that jumped to $27.71 billion. Today, it's estimated at $60–90 billion.
- **Government experts said "no" to high-speed rail, but then it happened anyway.** In 2019, officials told international investors that Canada was *not* planning true high-speed rail because it costs too much and skips too many towns. Yet the project has since moved toward exactly those higher speeds.
- **A big decision was made using a slideshow, not a full business plan.** In December 2020, under time pressure, the government accepted a presentation (nicknamed the "Mega Deck") instead of a proper written business case to approve moving forward. That slideshow has never been publicly released.
- **The math didn't include some real costs.** The cost-benefit analysis was calculated assuming diesel trains, even though the government later chose electric trains, which cost more. Job-creation numbers were added to make the project look better, even though the government's own advisors warned this wasn't standard practice and could be misleading.
- **Big unresolved risks at approval time:** How trains would actually get into downtown Toronto, Montreal, and Quebec City stations was still unsettled. Community consultations hadn't formally happened yet either.
- **Timing raises questions.** The key decisions happened right when federal budget planning was underway and when a top official (Michael Sabia) moved between roles connected to the project's funding bank and the Finance Department.
- **The key document is still missing.** In response to a follow-up request specifically for the "Mega Deck" presentation, the government says it has no record of it and pointed to other departments, which have yet to respond.

Bottom line: A multi-billion-dollar national infrastructure project appears to have passed a major approval stage based on an unreleased slide deck, with cost estimates that didn't include real technology costs, at a time when officials had already been told the more expensive, faster option wasn't part of the plan.

Source: Erin Durant, "A Decision Gate Passed on a Slide Deck," *The Canadian High-Speed Rail Files*, July 27, 2026. https://thealtofiles.substack.com/p/a-decision-gate-passed-on-a-slide

Canada Already Studied How High-Speed Rail Would Hurt Farms — Now Alto Won't Say What It Knows

What is Alto telling the public versus what older government studies already found out?

Alto says it's too early to know the route or its effects on farms. But studies from 2010 and 2011 — done by the government and by SNCF (the French company that runs France's fast trains, and is now helping build Canada's) — already showed that a train going 300 km/h can't use existing train tracks. It needs brand-new land, cutting through farmland.

High-speed rail will split farms in half. The 2011 study said cutting a farm in two causes real problems: farmers lose access to parts of their land, land becomes worth less, drainage gets messed up, and farm costs go up. That study even estimated around 500 farm crossings would need bridges or underpasses. Alto hasn't said how these crossings will work, and farm groups want Alto to study this properly before moving ahead.

How much land will be used? Alto hasn't said. So the author did the math herself: the train corridor is about 60 meters wide and the route is about 1,000 km long. That works out to about 6,000 hectares of land, so roughly the same size as the entire island of Manhattan, mostly cutting through farmland in Ontario and Quebec. (In Canadian terms, that's bigger than all of Bowen Island, BC, and just a bit smaller than Amherst Island, Ontario.)

Bottom line: Alto already has access to old studies that answer many of these questions, but instead of sharing that information, it's telling farmers and the public that answers aren't ready yet.

Source:
Durant, Erin. "Updated: Canada Studied HSR for Years. Here's what those studies say about rural impacts." *The Alto Files*, July 23, 2026. https://thealtofiles.substack.com/p/canada-studied-hsr-for-years-heres

Ottawa Already Warned Us: Why Alto Is Repeating the Same Mistakes That Doomed the LRT

A new analysis compares Ottawa's troubled LRT project to Canada's high-speed rail project, Alto, warning the country risks repeating the same failures.

- **Ottawa's LRT was a cautionary tale.** A judge-led inquiry found poor oversight, an unproven train design, rushed deadlines, and one-sided communication control. Transit is still worse than before.
- **Alto's structure is riskier.** Unlike Ottawa's model, Alto hands its private partner, Cadence, control over operations too, a setup government lawyers called "novel" and legally risky. VIA Rail, Canada's experienced operator, was sidelined in the process.
- **Speed and timelines have both crept up.** Plans capped at 177 km/h now target 300 km/h, despite warnings that no train runs that fast in cold winters like we have in Canada anywhere else in the world. Meanwhile, political pressure has compressed the schedule, straining land acquisition, labour, materials and Indigenous consultations, echoing the rushed deadline that caused technical shortcuts in Ottawa.
- **New "national interest" legislation (Bill C-5)** lets government fast-track approvals, skipping normal review steps.
- **Conflict-of-interest questions abound.** Ties between bidders and past advisors, a Finance Minister's partner hired by Alto and Alto's Chair's past legal work for SNC-Lavalin, now part of the Cadence consortium.
- **Transparency is lacking.** Alto's CEO gave evasive answers to the Senate on cost estimates, and key business case documents remain withheld from Parliament and the public despite formal requests.
- **Bottom line:** The Ottawa inquiry stressed that public interest and honest communication must come first in major infrastructure projects. The record suggests Alto isn't meeting that standard and is repeating the patterns that failed Ottawa taxpayers.

Source: Erin Durant, "Ottawa LRT Public Inquiry, Public Trust and Alto," *The Canadian High-Speed Rail Files*, July 10, 2026. https://thealtofiles.substack.com/p/ottawa-lrt-public-inquiry-public

Municipalities have power here — but some are signing it away

Municipalities have more power over the Alto project than most people think. But some are signing that power away.

A study paid for by the federal government and done at the University of Toronto found that Ottawa has no say over local land use or land taxes. That power belongs to provinces and municipalities. In Ontario, municipalities control zoning, road approvals and decisions about local infrastructure. That gives them real say over what gets built in their communities and on what terms.

There are limits to this power. Courts have ruled that the core of a federal railway project, where the tracks go, how they are built and how trains run, is outside municipal control. A 2024 decision by Canada’s highest court confirmed this when municipalities tried to block CN Rail from building a large rail hub near Milton, Ontario. They lost.

But Alto is not just building a railway. It also plans to develop real estate and raise money through what it calls land value capture around its stations. A McGill University study from March 2026 found that Alto needs to raise about $12 billion this way to make the project work financially. Municipalities have direct control over that kind of development. That is real leverage.

The problem is that Alto has been asking municipalities to sign confidentiality agreements before sharing detailed route and planning information. The National Farmers Union of Ontario has called these “non-disclosure agreements”, or “NDAs”. Some municipalities, including Stormont Dundas and Glengarry, Prescott-Russell and South Frontenac, have said no. Others, including Ottawa and Kingston, have signed.

Signing cuts a municipality off from the coordination that makes its planning power count. A municipality that has signed may not be able to share what it knows with its neighbours, its regional group, or the provincial bodies that speak for municipalities at the federal level. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario have not taken a clear public stand on this issue, even though it falls right in the middle of what they exist to do.

Municipalities are not powerless. But the window to act together is closing, one signed agreement at a time.

Source:
Durant, E. "Municipalities have more power than they think to fight Alto." *The Canadian High-Speed Rail Files*, Substack, July 18, 2026. thealtofiles.substack.com

Ethics for Alto: Alto must show that its route choice is fair, transparent, and in the public interest

High-speed rail could provide public benefits by reducing reliance on cars and airplanes. But Alto has not fully shown why its proposed routes are the best options, or allowed the public to fairly compare alternatives.

The project has focused on building new rail corridors, while other possible options, including using existing transportation corridors, have not been fully examined publicly. The public should see the costs, benefits and impacts of all realistic options before a final decision is made.

The proposed rail line will create benefits for many Canadians, but landowners, farmers, rural communities and Indigenous communities will face significant impacts. Thse groups need fair compensation, meaningful involvement in decisions, and clear ways to address problems if commitments are not met.

The project also raises environmental concerns, especially where routes could affect sensitive ecosystems, groundwater and wildlife. The environmental risks must be fully studied and long-term monitoring and protections should be required.

Concerns persist about community impacts, including changes to local roads, emergency services and existing passenger rail service. Clear agreements and accountability measures should be in place before construction begins.

Together, fairness requires, at least:

- Release and comparison of all realistic route options.
- An independent public process to evaluate the choices.
- Meaningful consent from affected Indigenous communities.
- Clear rules for compensation, accountability and dispute resolution.
- Protection of VIA Rail services that could be affected by Alto.

The bottom line: Alto should not be judged only by speed or technology. A project of this size must also be transparent, fair, environmentally responsible and clearly shown to serve the public interest.

Source: Drydyk, Jay. "Development Ethics for Alto: Brief to the Alto online public consultation." ALTO HSR Citizen Research Initiative. Available at: https://citizenresearch.ca/briefs/development-ethics/

The Land-Buying Problem

Bill C-15 lets Canada start buying land for the Alto rail line very early, right after a basic project description, before any real study of its effects. It also removes landowners' right to a hearing where a judge decided if taking their land was truly necessary.

Other countries tried this and it backfired. Britain bought land for its HS2 rail line, then cancelled part of the project in 2023, wasting £643 million. Years later, it's still dealing with lawsuits and cleanup. California started buying land in 2012 when its design was only 15% finished, leading to wrong purchases, doubled costs, and lawsuit. It has since changed course. Britain also has a rule, born from the 1954 scandal of Crichel Down, requiring unused government land to be returned to its owner. Canada has no such rule.

Alto plans to start buying land in 2027 with its design only 10–40% done. Its route isn't even finalized, risking the same mistakes, or worse. It also chose a costlier new route through farmland east of Ottawa instead of upgrading track VIA Rail already owns.

The lesson from Britain and California: buying land too early wastes money and invites lawsuits. Canada is repeating this without the safeguards other countries eventually added, leaving communities along the route demanding answers about when land-taking begins.

Source: Durant, Erin. "Take the Land First, Decide What To Build Later: What Britain and California Learned the Hard Way About Taking Land Before You Know You Need It." *The Canadian High-Speed Rail Files* (Substack), July 2, 2026. https://thealtofiles.substack.com/p/take-the-land-first-decide-what-to.

How the rules keep changing and what it means for landowners

The federal government has been changing the rules around land acquisition for the Alto project through a series of separate laws and policy documents. The changes have largely gone unnoticed. Taken together, they represent a significant shift in the rights of landowners along the corridor. ("Title holders" is the term used in Canada, but let's keep the word "landowners" for now.)

In November 2025, changes to land acquisition rules were included in a budget bill called Bill C-15. Before that bill passed, the government had to try to buy land before it could expropriate it. That no longer applies. Cabinet used to have to approve expropriations. That check has been removed. Landowners who objected had the right to a public hearing. That right is gone. A single minister now makes the call. Notices of intent to expropriate land can now be delivered by email.

Bill C-15 also removed the rule that stopped the government from acquiring land before an environmental review was done. Alto can now legally expropriate land before the impacts have been studied, and before anyone has decided if the project should go ahead. That decision does not come until 2029.

In May 2026, the government proposed cutting all federal project reviews to one year. For a project of this scale, that raises serious questions about whether a real environmental review is possible. A further proposal would let Cabinet approve the entire corridor by order, bypassing the environmental review agency and the transportation agency.

For landowners, this is already real. The government can place a notice on your property today that stops you from renovating, building or selling freely, before the environmental review has even started. Land acquisition is expected to begin in late 2026 or early 2027.

Alto's CEO has said the project prefers willing buyers and willing sellers. The legislation creates a different set of rules.

There is also an unresolved conflict of interest question. The Privy Council Office, which is overseeing this process, is now headed by Michael Sabia. Sabia was previously CEO of CDPQ, the Quebec pension fund whose infrastructure arm leads Cadence, Alto's private development partner. No public conflict of interest disclosure has been made.

Landowners along the corridor are being asked for input through a consultation process. What has not been said plainly is that the right to a public hearing is gone, the requirement to negotiate before expropriating is gone, Cabinet oversight is gone, and the environmental review may be cut short, all before construction begins.

Source: Durant, Erin. "The Next Legislative Amendments Impacting Major Projects." *The Canadian High-Speed Rail Files* (Substack), July 5, 2026. https://thealtofiles.substack.com/p/the-next-legislative-amendments-impacting.

Even supporters of Alto are describing a different train

A Quebec transit advocacy group, Trajectoire Québec, submitted a letter supporting Alto's high-speed rail project. But a closer look shows a mismatch: the nine things they're actually asking for — downtown stations, more stops, affordable fares, protection of existing train service, and good public consultation — describe a slower, cheaper, more frequent train system, not a 300 km/h bullet train. A true high-speed line needs fenced-off tracks and few stops to reach those speeds, which pushes stations to the edges of cities and makes extra stops counterproductive. The report also found the project is likely to cost far more and attract far fewer riders than hoped, pushing fares up rather than down, and that public opposition actually grew after the consultation process rather than shrinking.

The big takeaway? Even one of the project's own supporters ends up listing everything the high-speed plan can't deliver, without realizing it. That's notable because this isn't coming from critics — it's coming from a group cheering the project on. It suggests the gap between what Alto promises and what it can actually provide isn't a matter of opinion or politics, but something built into the project's basic design.

Source: "A Friendly Witness," Alto HSR Citizen Research Initiative, citizenresearch.ca, April 2026. https://citizenresearch.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/a-friendly-witness.pdf

Cost

The Citizen Research Initiative’s analysis, based on a review of 16 comparable high-speed rail projects around the world, puts the likely cost at $142 billion. The range runs from $76 billion on the low end to $264 billion on the high end. Two factors drive costs up in projects like this: how hard the engineering is, and how much community opposition the project faces. This project scores at the extreme end on both.

Oxford University professor Bent Flyvbjerg, who has studied more than 16,000 large projects, finds that rail projects run over budget by an average of 44.7 percent and fall short of ridership targets by an average of 51.4 percent. Every major high-speed rail project in history has cost more than planned.

Source*:*
What high-speed rail really costs (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)
Engineering complexity and community friction: a multivariate reference-class analysis (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)
Community friction and cost in high-speed rail: methodology and four-year trajectory (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)

Ridership

How many people will ride Alto? The project says 24 million passengers per year by 2055 and 43 million by 2084. A consultant report commissioned to support the project pushed the 2055 number even higher, to 28 million. But Alto has never published the methods behind those numbers, the assumptions that drive them, or what happens if those assumptions turn out to be wrong.

Other data tells a different story. Statistics Canada's 2026 population projection puts the total number of people living along the corridor at 19.8 million by 2055. To hit 24 million riders, Alto would need to carry roughly 75 percent of every intercity trip made in the corridor by every mode: car, air and rail combined. No rail service in North America has ever come close to that. The best services on the continent, including Amtrak's Acela and Florida's Brightline, have never exceeded 0.30 trips per person per year. Alto is counting on 1.2 trips per person per year. That is not a forecast. It is an assumption.

Source*:*
Ridership projections: the Madrid–Barcelona comparator and the Canadian car-culture gap (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)
Who benefits? Who pays? (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)
Alto and community friction: briefing deck for decision-makers (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)

Carbon

Alto says this project is good for the climate. But a study examining a 50-year cycle and nine different scenarios found something different. Even with four million riders a year, none of the scenarios pay back their "carbon debt" in a reasonable amount of time, especially once you factor in more people switching to electric cars. Ontario's electricity grid actually got 25 percent dirtier in 2024 and it's expected to get worse as more gas plants are built. Only the best-case scenario—the most riders plus a totally clean electricity grid—pays back its carbon debt. Even that will take about 32 years.

Source:
Alto high-speed rail 50-year lifecycle carbon budget (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)
Alto construction carbon: input data and assumptions (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)
Alto operational carbon: input data and assumptions (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)

Environment

The southern route would break federal law. The Species at Risk Act sets hard limits on disturbing the habitat of endangered species. This route would disturb a cave in the Moira Karst where four species of endangered bats spend the winter. It would cut through the last home of the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike, a bird with only about 40 left in Canada. It would also cut through the protected habitat of the Grey Ratsnake. On top of this, the route threatens Canada's UNESCO Biosphere status for the Frontenac Arch. When the public consultation opened, environmental field surveys had not even started.

The route also crosses rare alvar habitat: thin soil over bare limestone rock, found in only a few places on Earth. Ontario's Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry calls Great Lakes alvars globally rare and at risk, home to plants and animals found nowhere else. The Napanee Limestone Plain is one of North America's largest alvar landscapes.

Underneath that landscape lies karst: a maze of underground caves, rivers, sinkholes and tunnels carved into the limestone. Building on karst is dangerous. The ground can shift, flood or collapse without warning.

Near Ottawa, the corridor would also cross Leda clay, a type of marine clay that can suddenly turn to liquid under stress, causing landslides and sinkholes.

In short, the southern route runs through land that is both extremely risky to build on and home to rare ecosystems found almost nowhere else.

Source:
The southern corridor: Species at Risk Act and UNESCO Biosphere Reserve implications (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)
Bat species at risk and the Moira Karst hibernaculum (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)
The Napanee Limestone Plain: implications for high-speed rail route choice (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)

Community and rural life

A fully fenced rail line at this scale would permanently cut hundreds of rural roads. Research shows that each extra minute of delay for an ambulance reduces the chance of surviving a cardiac arrest by 6 to 10 percent. No health impact study has been done. Volunteer fire crews would face longer drives to reach fires at a time when Ontario's wildfire season is getting longer and worse. Blasting and excavation could permanently damage private wells that have no municipal water backup. Winter trail networks that bring in an estimated $450 to $540 million a year in rural tourism cannot simply be moved around a permanent fence. Hundreds of historic cemeteries along the route have not been assessed.

Source:
Road severance and grade separation: what 1,000+ crossings mean for rural Ontario (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)
Fire suppression, wildfire response, and road severance (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)
Impact on emergency medical services and healthcare access (Citizen Research Initiative, 2026)

Freight versus passenger rail

In June 2026, Alto published a report on high-speed rail and freight. Its main claim is that building a new high-speed line would free up space on the existing CN rail corridor between Toronto and Montreal. That corridor runs through Oshawa, Cobourg, Belleville, Kingston, Brockville and Cornwall, and today carries both VIA Rail passenger trains and freight.

The catch is this: the benefit only grows if fewer passenger trains use the old corridor. Alto's report says the freed-up space would be split between passengers and freight, but does not say how. The group that gets to make that call is Cadence, Alto's own private partner, which is also set to run the existing passenger trains. That is a serious conflict of interest. VIA Rail riders are the ones at risk.

One thing is true: keeping passenger trains and freight trains on separate tracks is better for both. But Alto's plan achieves that by taking the passengers away. There is another way to do it. Build a dedicated passenger line along the same corridor. That separates the traffic just as well and keeps train service running through the lakeshore communities that depend on it.

Source:
Citizen Research Initiative. The Freight Dividend and the Vanishing Train. 2026. https://citizenresearch.ca/post-consultation/freight-and-the-vanishing-train/
CPCS (prepared for Alto), "High-Speed Rail and Freight Capacity: Potential Freight Benefits of Alto," June 2026. https://www.altotrain.ca/sites/default/files/2026-06/high-speed-rail-and-freight-capacity_final.pdf

Winter weather: a problem Alto has not solved

Running trains at 300 kilometres per hour in a Canadian winter is not like running them in France or Japan. Eastern Ontario gets up to 300 centimetres of snow a year. Temperatures drop below minus 20 degrees regularly. The ground goes through roughly 90 freeze and thaw cycles every year. The corridor would be below freezing for up to 150 days annually.

No high-speed rail system in the world runs at 300 km/h in those conditions. Canada's own government confirmed this in 2020, when consultants told two federal ministers that they could not find a single example anywhere in the world. That finding was never made public. It only came out through an access to information request years later.

The closest example that exists is China's Harbin-Dalian line, built specifically for cold-weather operation after China commissioned 22 separate studies and thousands of tests. Even then, that line slows down by 29 percent in winter, dropping from 350 km/h to 250 km/h, just to keep running safely.

Winter creates specific problems for high-speed rail that add up quickly. Snow and ice collect under the train and freeze into blocks that can weigh more than one tonne per carriage. These blocks fall off at high speed and damage track equipment. The overhead power lines that trains draw electricity from ice over and break. The switches that move trains from one track to another have to be electrically heated around the clock to stop them from freezing solid. The track itself, which must stay within a few millimetres of perfect alignment for trains to run safely at high speed, is subject to ground movement from frost every winter and thaw every spring.

A comparable cold-climate rail project in Europe ran 25 percent over budget, had to rebuild 20 percent of its track before it even opened due to frost damage and ran at reduced speeds for three years after opening. Alto is proposed for the same latitude.

Alto has published no analysis showing how it would handle any of this.

Source: Citizen Research Initiative, post-consultation winter and ice weather brief — citizenresearch.ca/post-consultation/winter-ice-weather/ and Alto operational carbon: input data and assumptions — citizenresearch.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Operational-CO2-input.pdf

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You can also contact the Citizen Research Initiative here: info@altohsrcitizenresearch.ca

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