

Debunking ALTO

This document provides a high-level summary of key issues, largely drawing on analysis from the Citizens Research Initiative.

Cost



ALTO puts the cost of the HSR at **\$60–\$90 billion**, however:

- Imbleau has confirmed that there is **still no “credible budget”**
- **~90% of megaprojects go over budget, average overrun of ~45%** (Flyvbjerg database)
- **A few examples** include:
 - UK HS2 increased from ~£33 billion to over £100 billion before scope reductions
 - California HSR increased from ~\$25 billion USD to over \$100 billion USD
 - Eglinton Crosstown LRT increased from \$5.3 billion to over \$12.5 billion
- **\$5.2 billion** will be spent on this project (2021-2025 Federal Budgets) **before construction even begins**
- Although the HSR can travel at 300 km/h, the **average speed** is estimated to be approximately **195 km/h** (Toronto-Montreal 580 km / 3 h) so we are **paying for 300 km/h infrastructure** to achieve results closer to a ~200 km/h system

Economic Benefits



ALTO says it expects to **increase Canada’s annual GDP by ~\$24.5 billion**, however:

- The C.D. Howe Institute estimates the potential impact to be much lower - only \$15-\$27 billion over 60 years (**~\$250-\$417 million/year**)
- C.D. Howe Institute also identifies that the benefit does **not come from GDP growth**, but from time savings, and only occurs if people **use travel time saved to generate economic activity**
- The HSR will likely **require ~\$1.28 billion/year in subsidies for 44 years** (McGill TRAM Study)
- **Subsidies to VIA Rail** (over \$700 million/year) would **need to continue** to serve areas without HSR, although it is also possible that existing regional rail services would be deprioritized, further marginalizing rural, and small- and medium-sized communities and hurting them economically
- ALTO estimates ~50,000 construction jobs, but **all major construction projects create jobs**—so the key question is whether this is the best use of public funds
- ALTO projects ~\$1 billion/year in **tourism benefits**, but global HSR examples show benefits **go to big cities with stations**, not rural areas or provinces without HSR
- The project **ignores the negative impact the rail line will have on profitable ventures**—for example, disruption to Ontario’s agri-food sector would impact the \$52 billion/year it generates, cutting off trails and routes would hurt the \$3-\$6 billion/year snowmobiling industry in Ontario, and bisecting the Frontenac Arch biosphere would impact the \$1.8 billion/year in tourism it generates

Travel Time



ALTO says it will **reduce Toronto to Montreal travel time to ~3 hours**, however:

- Total journey time depends on station location and last-mile transportation; if stations are **outside city centres, overall travel time could be higher**
- With an **alternative approach**—such as separating passenger from freight rail and running along the 401 corridor—VIA Rail’s current Venture trains could reach speeds of up to 200 km/h, for **~3.5 hours from Toronto to Montreal**, and this option would:
 - Be built at a much **lower cost**
 - Deliver **benefits as** each section is **completed** (versus from 2030 to early 2040s)
 - **Limit expropriation** of homes and farms and disruption to communities
 - **Reduce environmental impact** to sensitive ecosystems

Ridership



- ALTO projects **24 million riders/year by 2055** and 43 million by 2084, however:
- **No detailed ridership methodology** has been publicly released
 - Globally, HSR projects **fall short of ridership forecasts by ~65%** (Flyvbjerg’s database)
 - Current **travel volumes are much lower**:
 - ~3.1 million passengers/year on the Toronto–Ottawa–Montreal rail corridor
 - ~4.1 million passengers/year on Canada’s entire national rail network (all routes)
 - ~5–6 million passengers/year on flights between Toronto–Ottawa and Toronto–Montreal
 - **Station location, ticket prices, weather-based service reliability, and last-mile transportation requirements** (especially with some stations outside city centres), will impact ridership outcomes
-

Sustainability



- ALTO claims the HSR is a **sustainable transportation solution**, however, it would:
- Generate **~7 to 30 megatonnes of “carbon debt” during construction**—an amount unlikely to be offset, especially as electric vehicles and planes become more common
 - Consume **~50 MW of power per train** (Imbleau)—enough electricity to power ~40,000 homes/year and requiring 12+ substations and additional infrastructure along the route
 - Create a **permanent, continuous 1,000 km barrier** that **fragments habitats and ecosystems**, and disrupts wildlife **migration routes**
 - **Threaten** a wide range of **at-risk species**, such as the Grey Ratsnake, Eastern Wolf, Blanding’s Turtle, Eastern Loggerhead Shrike, and Tri-colored Bat
 - Threaten **rare plants**, such as the Butternut, Juniper Sedge, and Lakeside Daisy
 - Increase the **risk of invasive species** through soil disturbance, vegetation clearing, and disruption of natural drainage patterns
 - Threaten **critical watersheds**, including the Moira, Salmon, and Napanee Rivers
 - Potentially **bisect** the **UNESCO-designated Frontenac Arch Biosphere**, a globally significant ecological corridor
 - Potentially **fragment** the Napanee Limestone Plain, **one of only five alvar grassland habitats in the world** and home to many at-risk species
 - Introduce **de-icing chemicals** into ecologically sensitive areas
-

Community
Impact



- ALTO emphasizes **improved connectivity** between major cities, however:
- For **rural communities** along the route, there would be **extensive expropriation** of homes, farms, and private property—in addition to the impact on individuals and families, this would result in reduced local workforce availability, decreased customer base for businesses, and lower municipal tax revenue
 - **Productive farmland**—often held for generations—would be **lost or permanently altered** with fields divided, access between parcels restricted, and movement of equipment and livestock significantly constrained
 - **Communities** would be **physically divided** with severed roads becoming a barrier to **local movement** and daily life, increased travel time for everyday tasks, and **emergency services** affected by longer or more complex routes
 - **Private wells** would risk both **contamination** (from chemical leaching) and **going dry** (as the water table lowers for deep excavations) and for many communities wells are often the only source of water (no piped municipal supply to fall back on)
 - **Municipal road infrastructure costs** could increase due to the movement of **construction vehicles and materials** on roads designed for farm equipment and local traffic
 - Comparisons to infrastructure projects like the 401 and CPR are misleading as those projects provided affected communities with local access points, creating regional connectivity and economic benefits, while ALTO provides **no local stops or associated benefits**