

The Last Mile

What ALTO's Toronto and Ottawa station decisions mean for urban residents — and for door-to-door travel times the marketing does not show

On April 30, 2026, ALTO chief executive Martin Imbleau publicly confirmed that the Greater Toronto Area may receive two stations rather than one — with a suburban station built first because, in Imbleau's description, a downtown station may take longer due to dense urban conditions. A timeline for the downtown station was not specified. On May 1, 2026, federal Transport Minister Steven MacKinnon publicly indicated that the former Union Station on Rideau Street in downtown Ottawa is not an ideal location for the city's high-speed rail terminal, citing geotechnical challenges. The existing VIA Rail station on Tremblay Road, east of the downtown core, has emerged as the operative option.

This brief takes the now-disclosed station decisions for Toronto and Ottawa, sets them beside the project's marketed door-to-door promise, and asks a single question: what do urban residents at the corridor's endpoints actually receive?

Executive Summary

ALTO's political case rests on a downtown-to-downtown promise: residents of Toronto, Ottawa, Montréal, and Québec City will be able to step on a fast train in their downtown and arrive in another downtown a few hours later. That proposition underpins the \$60–90 billion price tag, the 51,000-job claim, and the \$35 billion in projected GDP impact.

The station decisions disclosed in late April and early May 2026 do not deliver that proposition. They deliver something different: suburban-to-suburban high-speed rail with downtown-adjacent transit connections at each end.

Across the Toronto and Ottawa station decisions, three patterns emerge:

- **The downtown-station gap.** For Toronto, ALTO has stated an intent to eventually have a downtown station but has committed to no timeline, no location, no design, and no project envelope for it. For Ottawa, the downtown option appears to have been set aside in favour of an existing suburban-fringe station. In neither city has ALTO published a true downtown station as a project deliverable with a date attached.
- **The door-to-door silence.** ALTO's consultation materials, public communications, and benefit projections cite train-on-track times. They do not cite door-to-door times. With the now-likely station configurations, the marketed three-hour Toronto–Montréal journey is closer to four and

a half hours door-to-door; the two-hour Toronto–Ottawa journey is closer to three to three and a half hours.

- **The local-consensus override.** In Ottawa, the downtown option was supported by the mayor, the Board of Trade, Invest Ottawa, and Ottawa Tourism, with openness from the National Capital Commission. The federal Transport Minister’s May 1 signal effectively overruled that consensus by characterising the option as not ideal — without ALTO completing the comparative feasibility study the local stakeholders had requested.

The history of comparable infrastructure projects suggests that the downtown station promise should not be assumed. Three precedents are examined in this brief: the Mirabel airport, where a 1969 promise of modernity left a generation of expropriated families and ultimately delivered an underused cargo facility on land mostly returned decades later; the United Kingdom’s HS2, where the originally-promised Y-shaped network from London to Manchester and Leeds was reduced to a single line to Birmingham at three to four times the original cost; and California’s high-speed rail project, where a 2008 promise of a San Francisco–Los Angeles service has, after seventeen years and \$13.8 billion in spending, become a Bakersfield–Merced segment whose downtown stations are themselves now being relocated to less expensive sites.

In each of these precedents, the political case was built on a full-network promise; the delivery has been or is being a reduced version, with the harder and more expensive parts deferred or cancelled. Toronto residents being told that the suburban station will be built first and the downtown station later are being offered a familiar arrangement, on terms that have not historically held.

The Setting: What Is At Stake for Urban Residents

Most public discussion of ALTO’s impacts has, understandably, focused on rural communities along the corridor — on farmland, on Eastern Ontario, on the small communities whose VIA service may be reduced or eliminated. That focus is appropriate: those communities sit directly in the path of a fenced sixty-metre right-of-way with three-metre security walls running for one thousand kilometres.

ALTO is not only a rural infrastructure project, however. It is also an urban one — perhaps especially an urban one, since the project’s political case rests on the proposition that residents of the four corridor cities will be able to access a fast intercity train from their downtowns. The station decisions now visible in the public record bear directly on whether that promise will be delivered.

The consultation that closed April 24, 2026 was overwhelmingly attended by residents of corridor communities along the proposed route. Urban residents at the corridor’s endpoints — the implied beneficiaries of the project — were largely absent. The disclosures of late April and early May arrived after that consultation closed. The next public window is the autumn 2026 consultation that follows corridor narrowing; by the time that window opens, substantive alignment decisions will have been taken.

This brief is offered as a reference document for federal decision-makers, urban municipal leaders in the corridor cities, MPs in affected ridings, and constituents who have not yet had a public opportunity to consider what the project, as currently scoped, delivers for them.

Toronto: Two Stations, One of Which is Built First

On April 30, 2026, ALTO chief executive Martin Imbleau told reporters that the Greater Toronto Area may feature two high-speed rail stations rather than one. The announcement was widely reported as a service expansion. Read carefully, it is something different.

Imbleau’s framing was that a secondary station in a nearby suburb could ease the delays associated with constructing a downtown station — which, he indicated, would take longer to build given the dense urban environment. **The suburban station gets built first because the downtown station is harder.** The downtown station is to follow on a timeline that has not been specified.

Three points follow from this disclosure that have not, in the reporting to date, been drawn out clearly.

1. The downtown station has no timeline

ALTO has not committed to a date by which a downtown Toronto station will be operational. It has not committed to begin construction of a downtown station at a specified point. It has not committed to designs, to a station location, or to a project envelope. The downtown station, at this stage, is a stated intent rather than a project deliverable. There is no published mechanism by which the downtown station’s delivery is enforced — no funding commitment tied to its completion, no statutory deadline, no contractual obligation. It will be built if and when, in the future, the federal government, ALTO, and the project’s private-sector partner Cadence agree that it should be.

2. The suburban station will be the operational reality

The Toronto–Quebec City eastern segment is, on ALTO’s own published timeline, the last segment to be built. Construction on the central Ottawa–Montréal segment begins in 2029. The eastern segment construction is to launch “simultaneously” with the central segment, but no completion date has been published. If the Toronto suburban station opens with the rest of the eastern segment, the downtown station — if it ever follows — would arrive years later. For an entire generation of Toronto residents who use the service, the suburban station will be the operational reality.

3. A second station never built remains a single suburban station

Promises to build later infrastructure are common in public-sector mega-projects; their delivery is far less common. The federal commitment is to one station — the suburban one — with the downtown station contingent on technical, financial, and political conditions that have not yet been specified, let alone met. Until those conditions are met, the operational system has one Toronto station, in a location that is not yet identified, somewhere in the suburbs.

ALTO has separately confirmed that Toronto’s Union Station is not the front-runner for the eventual downtown station either. At a Senate transport committee meeting in December 2025, Imbleau said the objective is a station “in the vicinity of Union Station,” without ruling Union itself out, but signalling clearly that it is not the leading option. The technical reasons have not been publicly explained, but the constraints are well understood: the Union Station Rail Corridor is already the busiest rail corridor in Canada, owned by Metrolinx and operated by Toronto Terminals Railway, with platform and trackage capacity already constrained by GO Expansion.

For an urban resident contemplating an ALTO trip from downtown Toronto, the question is therefore not which downtown station they will leave from, but which suburban station, and how they get there. The published consultation materials identify a study corridor approaching Toronto from the east through industrial and agricultural areas, leveraging existing rail, highway, and utility corridors. The likely siting locations for a suburban station have not been disclosed; the candidates publicly speculated about include eastern Toronto, Pickering, Markham, and Scarborough.

Ottawa: How the Downtown Option Was Set Aside

Ottawa’s station decision is further along than Toronto’s, and the operative direction is now visible. Two locations were under consideration: the former Union Station on Rideau Street — the city’s 1912 Beaux-Arts terminal, currently the temporary Senate building, located steps from Parliament, the National Arts Centre, and the ByWard Market — and the existing VIA Rail station on Tremblay Road, built in the 1960s, located east of downtown along the city’s LRT line.

Local consensus, as expressed publicly in the months before the consultation closed, favoured the downtown Rideau Street option. Mayor Mark Sutcliffe explicitly backed the downtown option in late January. Days before the consultation closed, the Ottawa Board of Trade, Invest Ottawa, and Ottawa Tourism issued a joint letter calling on ALTO to complete a feasibility study comparing both sites — including comparative ridership, catchment area, end-to-end journey time, and multimodal connectivity. The National Capital Commission, which manages the Rideau Canal and the surrounding heritage areas, expressed openness to collaborating with ALTO on a downtown station.

On May 1, 2026, federal Transport Minister Steven MacKinnon, speaking with reporters at an unrelated announcement at Ottawa airport, indicated that the downtown Union Station option presents geotechnical challenges. He cited the 2016 Rideau Street sinkhole that opened during construction of the city’s LRT tunnel. ALTO’s chief executive, separately on Radio-Canada that week, told the broadcaster that a downtown station would have to be underground — which would slow trains and add complexity without growing ridership.

The Tremblay Road station, by contrast, is on the surface, on the LRT line, and has expansion capability. ALTO has not formally announced Tremblay as the chosen site — that announcement is expected with

the narrower corridor disclosure in autumn 2026 — but the public signals from both ALTO and the federal minister now point in that direction.

Three operational consequences of a Tremblay terminus are worth setting out, since they are not addressed in ALTO's consultation materials.

Tremblay is not within walking distance of the parliamentary precinct

The station sits roughly four kilometres east of Parliament Hill. Arriving travellers reach downtown by LRT (approximately ten to fifteen minutes), by taxi or rideshare (similar time, traffic-dependent), or on foot (approximately fifty minutes). For business and leisure travellers whose destination is the central core — downtown hotels, the conference centre, the diplomatic district, the ByWard Market — this is a meaningful door-to-door addition at every trip.

The Tremblay catchment underperforms suburban Fallowfield

Historical VIA boarding data — from 2001 when Fallowfield opened through 2019 — shows steady boarding growth at suburban Fallowfield while Tremblay's share of Ottawa-area VIA boardings declined. The implication is straightforward: under existing intercity rail patterns, Ottawa-area passengers have voted with their feet for a station closer to where they actually live and park, and away from a station that requires a downtown trip first. ALTO has not published a comparative ridership analysis for the two options that would address this evidence.

A bridge crossing of the Ottawa River must still be built

ALTO has indicated the corridor will cross the Ottawa River at a narrow point on a new rail bridge to enter Quebec. The siting and design of that bridge has not been disclosed; it is one of the largest engineering elements of the Ottawa–Montréal segment and will itself involve property acquisitions and environmental approvals on both sides of the river. The bridge's landing point on the Quebec side will affect both the alignment of the corridor through Gatineau and Mirabel and the door-to-door access time for Outaouais residents using the system.

Door-to-Door Reality: The Journey Time the Marketing Does Not Show

ALTO's public materials cite headline travel times of approximately three hours between Toronto and Montréal, and approximately two hours between Toronto and Ottawa. These are train-on-track times: from when the train leaves the boarding station to when it arrives at the alighting station. They are not door-to-door times.

The peer-reviewed satisfaction literature establishes that access and egress time at each end of a journey contributes independently to overall journey satisfaction and to mode choice — and that remotely-sited stations systematically underperform demand projections. Door-to-door time is what passengers actually

experience and what they actually compare against alternative modes when deciding whether to use a service.

For ALTO’s urban endpoints, the door-to-door reality with the now-likely station configurations is meaningfully different from the marketed train-on-track time. The table below sets out illustrative end-to-end times for three common journey types, comparing the marketed figure with a realistic door-to-door figure that includes access and egress at both ends.

JOURNEY	MARKETED	DOOR-TO-DOOR
Downtown Toronto → Downtown Ottawa Suburban Toronto station · Tremblay terminus, Ottawa	~ 2 hours	~ 3 to 3.5 hours + 30–45 min downtown Toronto to suburban station + 10–15 min boarding buffer + 15 min Tremblay to downtown Ottawa
Downtown Toronto → Downtown Montréal Suburban Toronto station · Northern Montréal/Laval terminus	~ 3 hours	~ 4.5 hours + 30–45 min downtown Toronto to suburban station + 10–15 min boarding buffer + 30–45 min northern Montréal/Laval to downtown
Downtown Ottawa → Downtown Montréal Tremblay departure · Northern Montréal/Laval terminus	~ 1 hour	~ 2 to 2.5 hours + 15 min downtown to Tremblay + 10–15 min boarding buffer + 30–45 min northern Montréal/Laval to downtown

Estimates above are illustrative and based on publicly disclosed station options as of May 2026. Final station locations on both ends remain under study. Access and egress times reflect typical transit and ride times to the parliamentary precinct in Ottawa, the financial district in Toronto, and the central business district in Montréal.

The implication for urban residents is direct. The Toronto–Montréal trip the marketing presents as “three hours” is, in operational reality with the current station configuration, closer to four and a half hours door-to-door. That figure compares against the existing VIA service (approximately five hours, downtown to downtown) and against air travel (one and a half hours flight time plus approximately two hours of airport time, totalling approximately three and a half hours door-to-door from the central business districts). For travellers whose origin and destination are both downtown, ALTO with suburban stations at both ends will be modestly faster than VIA — but the gap is meaningfully smaller than the marketed figure suggests, and the modal advantage over air travel from downtown to downtown is essentially eliminated.

For travellers whose origin or destination is itself in the suburbs — closer to the suburban station than to downtown — the ALTO configuration may be advantageous. This is, in effect, a reorientation of intercity rail toward suburban-to-suburban travel and away from the downtown-to-downtown framing that has

been the marketing's implicit promise. Whether that reorientation matches the demand profile underpinning ALTO's ridership projections is a question the demand model documentation has not been published to answer.

Bill C-15 in the Urban Context

Most reporting on Bill C-15's expropriation provisions has focused, reasonably, on rural land — on the farmers, the rural homeowners, the small-community residents whose properties sit in the path of the corridor. The framework, however, applies equally to urban property within ALTO's eventual right-of-way and to any urban approach corridor that has not yet been narrowed. The legal mechanism is the same; only the property type differs.

The High-Speed Rail Network Act, embedded inside Bill C-15 (the Budget 2025 Implementation Act), received royal assent in March 2026. It makes targeted amendments to the federal Expropriation Act for the ALTO project specifically. The four changes most directly relevant to urban property owners are these.

No obligation to attempt purchase first

The Crown is deemed to require the land for a public work, and the Minister proceeds directly to expropriation without first attempting a negotiated purchase. The standard requirement under the Expropriation Act — that the Crown must generally try to buy a property before expropriating it — does not apply to ALTO acquisitions.

No in-person public hearings to contest

The objection and public hearing process under sections 9 and 10 of the Expropriation Act is removed for ALTO acquisitions. Property owners retain a thirty-day window to file a written objection, but the in-person hearing process that would normally be available to contest the expropriation does not apply.

Right of first refusal for ALTO

Properties along the route may be subject to a registered notice of right of first refusal: if the owner wishes to sell, ALTO has sixty days to refuse or to buy. The mechanism applies to properties in the corridor under study and may attach before any individual property is formally identified as required for the project.

Canadian Transportation Agency review excluded

The construction of the railway lines is deemed approved under section 98 of the Canada Transportation Act, and the CTA is barred from rescinding that approval. The independent regulatory review that would normally apply to a major rail project is, for ALTO, not available.

A Toronto expropriation lawyer interviewed by The Globe and Mail in November 2025 characterised the project as on track to be the largest number of expropriations in modern Canadian history by both dollar value and property count. ALTO chief executive Imbleau, in a CFRA interview on May 2, 2026, publicly

estimated approximately 1,700 properties to be acquired across the corridor, of which approximately forty per cent — roughly 500 — would be farm properties. The remaining sixty per cent — approximately 1,200 properties — would not be farms. A meaningful share of those non-farm properties will be in the urban approach corridors into Toronto, Ottawa, and Montréal, and around station sites and bridge crossings.

As of May 2026, no list of urban properties potentially subject to acquisition has been published. The Toronto and Ottawa approach corridors have not been narrowed below the 10-kilometre study-corridor width. The two-station Toronto framing announced April 30 implies acquisitions around two station sites and along an approach corridor, the locations of which have not been disclosed. The Tremblay station decision implies acquisitions around the station and along the bridge approach to the Ottawa River, the location of which has not been disclosed. Property owners in those areas have not yet been notified individually because the corridor decisions that would determine which properties are affected have not been made.

ALTO's published timeline puts the corridor narrowing for the Ottawa–Montréal segment in autumn 2026, with formal letters to affected owners sent before public disclosure of the narrowed corridor. The Toronto–Ottawa segment is on a longer timeline with no published narrowing date.

Precedent: Promised Infrastructure That Did Not Deliver

The two-station Toronto announcement, the Ottawa downtown signal, and the door-to-door gap together raise a question that the consultation materials do not address: how reliably do major federally-backed rail projects deliver the configuration that was promised when their political case was being made? The historical record on this point is not comforting. Three precedents are directly relevant to ALTO. Each is a project of comparable scale, comparable political framing, and comparable promises about what the eventual delivered service would look like. None has delivered what was promised at the level of station siting or service scope.

Mirabel: the same federal government, in the same place, with the same families

In 1969, the federal government of Pierre Elliott Trudeau expropriated approximately 97,000 acres of farmland north of Montréal — an area larger than the city of Laval — from approximately 3,200 owners, displacing roughly 12,000 people. It was, and remains, the largest peacetime land expropriation in Canadian history. The promise was modernity: a new Montréal international airport, larger by surface area than any other in the world, opening in 1975, supported by ground transportation links and an industrial development zone.

The delivered project did not match the promise. Of the 97,000 acres expropriated, only approximately 5,000 to 6,880 acres were ever used for the airport. The promised ground transport links — connecting rail and highway access to downtown Montréal — were never built. The industrial development zone

never started. International passenger flights, originally meant to be redirected from Dorval to Mirabel, were never fully redirected; bilateral aviation agreements were renegotiated in the 1970s allowing international flights to land at other Canadian airports. Passenger service ended in 2004. The terminal building was demolished in 2014–2015.

Land was returned to original families in two waves: a first parcel under Brian Mulroney in 1985, and a second parcel of 4,450 hectares to 125 families under Stephen Harper in 2006, who described the original expropriation as “a mistake of history.” On February 9, 2026, the House of Commons unanimously passed (330–0) a motion sponsored by Bloc Québécois MP Jean-Denis Garon (Mirabel) calling for a formal federal apology for the 1969 expropriations.

The Mirabel parallel to ALTO is not historical analogy. It is the same federal government, with a similar special-vehicle project office (BANAIM then; ALTO and Cadence now), planning a new linear corridor through the same physical territory — the proposed ALTO alignment crosses a ten-kilometre band through Mirabel. Some of the families now facing potential ALTO expropriation are the same families, or descendants of the same families, who were expropriated in 1969 and who repurchased their land beginning in 1985. Sylvain Éthier, a maple sugar producer near Saint-Benoît whose parents’ home was expropriated when he was nine, told *The Globe and Mail* in February 2026 that “the scar was closed, and now it’s suddenly reopened.” Éric Desrosiers, a cattle farmer at Les Fermes Desrosiers — land his grandparents lost and his family repurchased — told the same paper that “what we have here is not for sale.”

The lesson Mirabel offers is not that infrastructure should not be built. It is that promises about what an infrastructure project will deliver — connecting infrastructure, ground access, the full operational system that justified the expropriation — are not always delivered, and that when they are not, the affected community is left with the cost without the promised benefit. For Toronto residents being offered a downtown station to follow the suburban one on an unspecified later timeline, the Mirabel precedent is the closest Canadian historical reference point.

HS2: how a high-speed rail network shrinks during delivery

The United Kingdom’s High Speed 2 project was announced in 2010 with cross-party support and an estimated total cost of approximately £33 billion for a Y-shaped network connecting London with Birmingham, Manchester, and Leeds. The originally-promised network was the political case: the project would link the southeast and the north, level up the regional economies, deliver eighteen trains per hour, and run on dedicated high-speed track its full length.

The delivered project, as currently scoped, does not match the original promise. The eastern leg from Birmingham to Leeds was cancelled in November 2021. The northern western leg from Birmingham to Manchester was cancelled by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in October 2023, citing cost overruns and changes in post-pandemic travel patterns. In October 2024, the new Labour government confirmed it

would not resurrect the cancelled phases. What is being delivered is the London–Birmingham segment of the originally-planned network — a single line, not a network.

The cost did not fall in proportion to the scope reduction. The original 2012 estimate for Phase 1 alone was approximately £20.5 billion. By 2025, the estimated cost of completing Phase 1 was £67–100 billion or higher. Costs have risen approximately 134 per cent in real terms between 2012 and 2022 for the segment that is being built. The benefit-cost ratio for what remains has fallen to 0.8, classified as poor value for money. The UK’s Public Accounts Committee characterised the 2023 cancellation as “a watershed moment” that exposed systemic failures of governance and oversight at both HS2 Ltd and the Department for Transport. Approximately £2.3 billion had already been spent on preparatory work for the cancelled Manchester leg.

The terminal stations have themselves been downgraded. Euston station, originally proposed with eleven HS2 platforms supporting eighteen trains per hour, has been reduced to six platforms supporting nine to eleven trains per hour, with the construction of the Euston station itself dependent on private-sector funding. Trains running beyond Phase 1’s northern endpoint at Handsacre will continue on existing conventional tracks at speeds slower than current trains — because the conventional tracks are not designed for high-speed-rail rolling stock. The 2033 opening date was confirmed in June 2025 to be unachievable, with no revised date set.

The HS2 lesson for ALTO is structural rather than political. It is not a question of which government cancelled which phase. It is that high-speed rail networks delivered in phases lose their later phases when costs rise, and that when phases are cancelled, the costs of the remaining segment do not fall proportionately. The promised network and the delivered network are different objects. For Toronto residents being offered a two-station configuration with the second station deferred to an unspecified later timeline, the HS2 record on phased delivery is directly relevant.

California: even the easy first segment loses its downtown stations

In November 2008, voters in California approved Proposition 1A, a \$9.95 billion bond measure to seed-fund a high-speed rail system connecting San Francisco with Los Angeles and Anaheim. The promised service was downtown-to-downtown, with intermediate stops in major cities, at speeds up to 220 mph. Original cost estimates for the full Phase 1 system were approximately \$33 billion.

Seventeen years later, the project that is actually being built is meaningfully different from the project voters approved. In his 2019 State of the State address, Governor Gavin Newsom announced that the project would focus on the Central Valley — the segment from Bakersfield to Merced, both inland cities of approximately 400,000 and 90,000 population respectively, neither of which figured in the political case made to voters in 2008. Newsom said: “there simply isn’t a path to get from Sacramento to San Diego, let alone from San Francisco to LA.”

The Bakersfield–Merced segment alone is now estimated to cost approximately \$37 billion — more than the original full-network estimate. As of August 2025, \$13.8 billion has been spent and the segment is not complete; revenue service is projected to begin in 2032, twenty-four years after voters approved the bond. The full Phase 1 buildout, if ever completed, is now estimated at \$89–128 billion (some forecasts have reached \$231 billion). In June 2025, the United States Federal Railroad Administration revoked \$4 billion in federal funding citing systemic failures in management, funding, and schedule compliance.

Within the reduced segment, even the station siting is being downgraded. The 2025 Supplemental Project Update Report includes proposals to move the Merced station out of the city’s downtown to a less expensive location — a change that, the Legislative Analyst’s Office has noted, would contradict California’s Senate Bill 198 (2022), which envisaged a downtown Merced station. The Bakersfield–Merced segment, even when complete, will not break even on operations: estimated cost recovery is between 45 and 74 per cent. The promised San Francisco–Los Angeles service depends on additional funding commitments that have not been secured.

The California lesson for ALTO is the most pointed of the three. It is not just that promised network connections do not always materialise (Mirabel), or that high-speed rail networks shrink during delivery (HS2). It is that within the reduced delivered segment, even the downtown stations that were part of that segment’s original specification can be moved to less expensive sites for cost reasons — contradicting prior legislative commitments — once construction is underway and reversal is no longer practicable.

This pattern is precisely the configuration ALTO is now offering Toronto: a suburban station built first because it is easier; a downtown station promised for the future on no specified timeline; the political case for the project resting on a downtown-to-downtown service the disclosed deliverable does not provide. Once the suburban station is built and the corridor is fixed, the same cost considerations that moved the Merced station out of downtown will apply to the Toronto downtown station — and the case for proceeding will be weaker, not stronger, because the suburban station will already be in operational use.

What the three precedents share

These three projects differ in jurisdiction, mode, and decade. They share a common architecture. In each case, the political case for the project rested on a configuration the project did not deliver. In each case, the delivered project was a reduced version, with the harder and more expensive parts deferred or cancelled. In each case, the political case was made before the substantive cost figures were available, and revised downward only after expenditure was already large enough to make cancellation politically unattractive.

ALTO is at an earlier stage than any of these three projects. The corridor has not been narrowed. Construction has not begun. The May 2 working-assumption disclosure on the cost figure means that the substantive cost estimates are still ahead. The disclosed station decisions — the two-station Toronto framing, the Tremblay direction in Ottawa — are early signals about which configuration the project is

actually heading toward, and they are arriving before the public has had a meaningful opportunity to question them. The autumn 2026 corridor narrowing is the next moment at which substantive disclosure could occur. The disclosures urban residents need to evaluate the project before that point are listed in the next section.

Cross-Cutting Findings

Looking at the disclosed information together, five patterns emerge that bear directly on what urban residents in Toronto and Ottawa can expect from the project as currently scoped.

One area where commitment is concrete

The procedural framework for property acquisition is now published. Compensation rules, independent appraisals, third-party cost coverage, and the legal sequence are all set out on ALTO's Property Acquisition Process page. For the property owner who eventually receives a notice, the rules under which their property will be acquired are now clearer than they were before the consultation. This is a genuine procedural advance, even though the substantive decisions that determine which properties receive notices have not been made.

The downtown-station gap

For Toronto, ALTO has stated an intent to eventually have a downtown station but has committed to no timeline, no location, no design, and no project envelope for it. For Ottawa, the downtown option appears to have been set aside in favour of an existing suburban-fringe station. In neither city has ALTO published a true downtown station as a project deliverable with a date attached. The marketed downtown-to-downtown service is, in operational terms, suburban-to-suburban service with downtown-adjacent transit connections at each end.

The door-to-door silence

ALTO's consultation materials, public communications, and benefit projections cite train-on-track times. They do not cite door-to-door times. The peer-reviewed mode-choice literature establishes that door-to-door time, not train-on-track time, governs the comparisons travellers actually make against alternatives. The ridership projections that anchor the project's benefit-cost case have not been published in a form that allows the access-and-egress assumption to be examined.

The local-consensus override

In Ottawa, the downtown option was supported by the mayor, the Board of Trade, Invest Ottawa, and Ottawa Tourism, with openness from the National Capital Commission. The federal Transport Minister's May 1 signal effectively overruled that consensus by characterising the option as not ideal — without ALTO completing the comparative feasibility study the local stakeholders had requested. The decision was made before the analysis the local stakeholders asked for was published.

The corridor-to-acquisition compression

Urban residents whose properties may eventually fall within an approach corridor or station footprint cannot evaluate that possibility until the corridor is narrowed below the current ten-kilometre study width. ALTO's timeline for the Ottawa–Montréal segment compresses corridor narrowing (autumn 2026), formal property-owner letters (before the narrowed corridor is publicly disclosed), and acquisition (late 2026 or early 2027) into a window of months. By the time urban property owners learn whether they are affected, the alignment will have been selected.

Implications for Autumn 2026

ALTO's working timeline puts corridor narrowing for the central segment in autumn 2026. Within that timeline, the disclosures urban residents need to evaluate the project cluster into two categories: items that ALTO and Transport Canada could publish now, and items that depend on broader federal decisions the acquisition framework cannot deliver.

Deliverable now by ALTO and Transport Canada

- **Door-to-door journey time projections.** For representative origin points in the GTA, the National Capital Region, and Greater Montréal, comparing the planned ALTO configuration against current car, air, and VIA travel. This is a single analytical exercise that could be published before corridor narrowing.
- **Toronto downtown station criteria and contingencies.** A published statement of the conditions under which the downtown Toronto station gets built, including timing milestones, financial triggers, and the mechanism that ensures the downtown station is delivered rather than indefinitely deferred.
- **Ottawa station selection rationale.** The technical and financial analysis underlying the apparent choice of Tremblay over the downtown Union Station option, including the comparative ridership and end-to-end journey-time analysis that the Ottawa Board of Trade, Invest Ottawa, and Ottawa Tourism formally requested.
- **Urban property acquisition geography.** A published breakdown of the approximately 1,700 estimated property acquisitions by region, including the urban approach corridors into Toronto, Ottawa, and Montréal, with approximate counts and timing.

Depends on broader federal decisions

- **Procedural protections for urban owners.** Whether additional procedural protections apply to urban property owners, given that Bill C-15 removes the negotiated-purchase requirement and abolishes in-person public hearings to contest expropriation. This is a federal legislative question; the acquisition framework cannot deliver it.

- **Meaningful consultation post-narrowing.** Whether the autumn 2026 consultation, which follows corridor narrowing, will accept input that materially reshapes alignment decisions, or whether it will accept comment only at the margin of decisions already made. This is a Transport Canada policy question.
- **Independent transparency on the business case.** Whether the ridership projections, the demand model, and the access-and-egress assumptions underpinning the benefit-cost case will be released in a form that allows independent examination before construction begins. The May 2 working-assumption disclosure on the cost figure underscores how much remains unpublished.

Where Things Stand as of May 5, 2026

In summary, against the disclosures urban residents in Toronto and Ottawa would need to evaluate the project:

- **Disclosed:** Property acquisition framework (compensation rules, independent appraisals, third-party cost coverage, legal process). Published on ALTO's Property Acquisition Process page.
- **Disclosed:** Approximate corridor-wide acquisition count of 1,700 properties across the Toronto–Quebec City corridor, of which 500 are farms (ALTO CEO interview, May 2, 2026).
- **Partial:** Toronto station configuration. Two-station framing announced, but only the suburban station is committed; the downtown station has no timeline or location.
- **Partial:** Ottawa station selection. Tremblay direction signalled, but no formal announcement and no published comparative analysis with the downtown option.
- **Not disclosed:** Door-to-door journey times for representative urban origin points, comparing the planned ALTO configuration against current car, air, and VIA travel.
- **Not disclosed:** Toronto suburban station candidate sites and the criteria for selection among them.
- **Not disclosed:** Toronto downtown station criteria, timeline, and contingencies — the conditions under which it gets built rather than indefinitely deferred.
- **Not disclosed:** Ottawa station rationale: the comparative ridership, catchment, and journey-time analysis the Ottawa Board of Trade, Invest Ottawa, and Ottawa Tourism formally requested.
- **Not disclosed:** Urban approach corridor alignments for Toronto and Ottawa, including the Ottawa River bridge crossing point.
- **Not disclosed:** Urban property acquisition geography: the regional breakdown of the 1,700 estimated property acquisitions.
- **Not disclosed:** Multimodal connectivity at each station: timetable integration with GO, UP Express, TTC, OC Transpo, and VIA Rail.

For the urban resident contemplating ALTO — not as an abstract national infrastructure project, but as a service they might use, near a corridor that may run near their home or workplace — the relevant disclosures are the ones that have not yet been made. The fall 2026 consultation is the next public window. By the time it opens, the central segment’s corridor will be narrowed and substantive alignment decisions will have been taken. Whether the consultation will accept input that materially reshapes those decisions, or whether it will accept input only at the margin of decisions already made, is a question the Minister of Transport has not yet answered.

The historical record on comparable projects — Mirabel, HS2, California — indicates that the urban configurations promised at the political-case stage are not always delivered, and that the harder and more expensive parts (the downtown stations, the connecting infrastructure, the full network) are routinely the parts that are deferred, downgraded, or cancelled. ALTO is at an earlier stage than any of these projects. The disclosures that would allow urban residents to evaluate the configuration they are actually being offered are still possible. The time to ask for them is now.

Questions for Your MP

Federal MPs in Toronto, Ottawa, and the surrounding ridings have constituents whose interests in the project are urban as well as rural. The following questions, addressed to the Minister of Transport via constituency MPs, would surface the disclosure gaps identified above.

- **1.** What is the published timeline for the downtown Toronto ALTO station, what conditions must be met before it is built, and what mechanism ensures it is built rather than indefinitely deferred?
- **2.** Will ALTO publish door-to-door journey time projections for representative origin points in the Greater Toronto Area, the National Capital Region, and Greater Montréal, comparing the planned configuration against current car, air, and VIA travel?
- **3.** Will ALTO publish the technical and financial analysis underpinning the Ottawa station decision, including the comparative ridership and end-to-end journey-time analysis that the Ottawa Board of Trade, Invest Ottawa, and Ottawa Tourism formally requested?
- **4.** What is the geographic distribution of the approximately 1,700 properties to be acquired, and what proportion of acquisitions are expected in the urban approach corridors of Toronto, Ottawa, and Montréal?
- **5.** Given that Bill C-15 removes the requirement to attempt a negotiated purchase before expropriation and abolishes in-person public hearings to contest, what additional procedural protections will apply to urban property owners notified of intended acquisition?
- **6.** Will the autumn 2026 consultation, which follows corridor narrowing, include a meaningful opportunity to revisit the alignment, or will it be limited to comment on a corridor that has already been selected?

- **7. What lessons from the Mirabel airport expropriation, HS2 phase cancellations, and California high-speed rail station downgrades have been incorporated into ALTO's delivery framework, and where in the public record are those lessons documented?**

This brief is offered as a reference document for federal decision-makers, urban municipal leaders in the corridor cities, MPs in affected ridings, and constituents tracking the urban impact file. It is intended to make clear, in plain analytic form, what has been disclosed, what has not been disclosed, and what has not been delivered by comparable projects in comparable circumstances.

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