
ALTO HSR CITIZEN RESEARCH INITIATIVE

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The Report That Vanished

Eighteen recommendations from Parliament's Transport Committee, the prorogation that intervened, and the questions about ALTO that remain unanswered

In September 2024, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities tabled an 18-recommendation report on the proposed Toronto–Quebec City passenger rail project, drawing on six meetings, 33 witnesses, and four briefs. Transport Canada committed to a formal response that fall or winter. Before the response was tabled, Parliament was prorogued on January 6, 2025. The project was then redesignated from High Frequency Rail to High Speed Rail. Bill C-15, enacting the High-Speed Rail Network Act, received royal assent on March 26, 2026. The committee's recommendations, including specific requests for cost analysis, document release, and a study of the impact on VIA Rail, were never answered. This brief sets out what the report asked for, what happened to it, and what its erasure tells the public about how a \$60–90 billion infrastructure project has so far moved through Parliament.

Executive Summary

The report. In September 2024, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities tabled its 18th report of the 44th Parliament: Issues and Opportunities: High Frequency Rail in the Toronto to Quebec City Corridor. Chaired by Peter Schiefke (Liberal), with vice-chairs Mark Strahl (Conservative) and Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Bloc), the committee held six meetings between September 2023 and February 2024, heard 33 witnesses, and received four written briefs. It produced eighteen recommendations covering the project's cost, ridership, route, station locations, public-private structure, impact on VIA Rail, and the release of preparatory technical documents.

The intervening events. Transport Canada's own October 2024 briefing materials stated that the Government of Canada "intends to provide a formal response this Fall/Winter." No response was tabled. The project was meanwhile being internally rebranded. Documents obtained under

Access to Information by The Canadian Press, published May 28, 2025, show that VIA HFR–VIA TGF Inc. signed a contract with Quebec-based marketing firm Cossette Communication Inc. in September 2023; at the same time it was asking the three qualified procurement bidders to “propose a second option without speed limitations.” Cossette invoices show more than \$330,000 billed between October 2023 and January 2025. An internal briefing note from late 2023 or early 2024 stated that “the concept of ‘high frequency’ faces strong opposition” and that “discussions of higher speed are met with openness, which would lead to greater project support and acceptance.” By April 2024, the name “Alto” had been selected internally and was being handled under the code name “Tracks.” The formal HFR-to-HSR designation document (briefing note AY-2024-537411, December 16, 2024) sits within an internal rebranding process that was already eighteen months under way. On January 6, 2025, Parliament was prorogued before the committed government response was tabled.

The procedural mechanics. Under House of Commons procedure, prorogation ends all committee activity. Studies lapse. Orders of reference lapse. A request for a government response to a tabled report technically survives prorogation, but the response itself, if not yet produced, does not. In practice, when prorogation occurs before a response has been tabled, the request to respond evaporates with the parliamentary session. That is what happened to TRAN Report 18.

What this brief argues. Eighteen recommendations from a bipartisan committee, built on substantial witness evidence, were procedurally voided before they could be answered substantively. The project that emerged from the prorogation was no longer the same project the recommendations had been written about. The committee’s questions about cost, the release of preparatory documents, and the project’s impact on VIA Rail — the questions a \$60–90 billion infrastructure project most needs the public record to address — remain open today. Whether this is procedurally normal or substantively unusual is a judgment for the reader; what is documented here is that it happened.

What the Committee Did

On March 7, 2023, the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities agreed to study the proposed High Frequency Rail project, along with two proposed Alberta rail projects (Calgary–Banff and Calgary–Edmonton). The original motion called for a minimum of four meetings. On September 18, 2023, the committee voted to extend the study. Between September 20, 2023 and February 29, 2024, the committee held six meetings dedicated to the file.

The committee heard from 33 witnesses including: ALTO’s own chief executive (then styled CEO of VIA HFR–VIA TGF Inc.), Martin Imbleau; Transport Canada’s Assistant Deputy Minister for High Frequency Rail, Vincent Robitaille; VIA Rail Canada’s president Mario Pélouquin; the Railway Association of Canada; Amtrak; the Urban Institute; HEC Montréal; transportation planners at l’Université de Montréal; chambers of commerce from Trois-Rivières, Québec City, and

Metropolitan Montreal; the Canadian Urban Transit Association; mayoral representatives from Drummondville and Trois-Rivières; labour representatives from Unifor and the International Transport Workers’ Federation; and consultants including civity Management Consultants from Germany. It received four written briefs.

The committee’s membership reflected all four recognized parties. The Conservative members included Mark Strahl (vice-chair), Scot Davidson, Leslyn Lewis, and Dan Muys. The NDP’s transport critic Taylor Bachrach sat on the committee. Bloc Québécois vice-chair Xavier Barsalou-Duval represented his party. Liberal members included Vance Badawey, Andy Fillmore, Angelo Iacono, Annie Koutrakis, and Churence Rogers.

The report was tabled in the House of Commons in September 2024. Its 18 recommendations addressed the procurement structure, cost transparency, the relationship to VIA Rail, station locations, the route, modal-shift design, downtown-to-downtown travel time, environmental considerations, freight-track impact, integration with regional transit, and the release of preparatory technical work. Transport Canada’s own internal briefing materials prepared for the Deputy Minister in October 2024 acknowledged the report and indicated that the government “intends to provide a formal response this Fall/Winter.”

The Recommendations That Mattered Most

Of the eighteen recommendations, four are particularly consequential when read against the project as it now stands. Each was specific, evidence-grounded, and tied to a substantive public-interest question. None has been substantively answered.

RECOMMENDATION 4 — HFR / HSR cost analysis	
<p>WHAT THE COMMITTEE ASKED FOR</p> <p>The Minister of Transport require VIA HFR-VIA TGF Inc. to provide within six months a budget and a timetable for completing this project, including an analysis of the incremental cost between HFR and HSR, and that this report be tabled in the House of Commons and reported to committee.</p>	<p>STATUS AS OF MAY 2026</p> <p>Never produced. By the time TRAN Report 18 was tabled in September 2024, the corporation it was directed at had already been paying an outside marketing firm for a full year to rebrand the project as HSR — the contract with Cossette Communication Inc. was signed in September 2023, three months before the committee began its second year of hearings. The name “Alto” had been selected internally by April 2024. By the time the recommendation’s six-month deadline arrived, the pivot was eighteen months under way. The cost comparison the committee asked for — the cost of choosing HSR over HFR — was not produced before the pivot, and has not been produced since. The \$60–90 billion AACE</p>

RECOMMENDATION 4 — HFR / HSR cost analysis

Class 5 range in Q-923 (April 22, 2026) now stands without this analysis behind it.

RECOMMENDATION 6 — Joint Project Office report

WHAT THE COMMITTEE ASKED FOR

That the government release the Joint Project Office's full, unredacted report on the HFR project.

STATUS AS OF MAY 2026

Not released. The Joint Project Office consumed approximately \$18 million in CIB-subcontracted preparatory studies (engineering work by Aecon, Arup, contracts with Ernst & Young, and other studies). Its underlying analysis has never been made public. ALTO operates with a substantial preparatory technical record that Parliament's own committee formally asked to see.

RECOMMENDATION 8 — Impact on existing VIA Rail service

WHAT THE COMMITTEE ASKED FOR

The Minister of Transport require VIA HFR-VIA TGF Inc. to provide, within a reasonable timeframe, an analysis of the impact a dedicated rail line will have on the use of the existing VIA rail service in the Toronto-Quebec City corridor, the viability of maintaining current services on the existing line, both the number of trains and on-time performance, and the possible impacts on freight traffic of continuing passenger rail service on the corridor.

STATUS AS OF MAY 2026

Not produced. The Senate Standing Committee on Transport and Communications, examining Bill C-15 in February 2026, raised the same concern: Transport Canada stated that VIA-served communities would continue to be served and that service "may be optimized," and the Senate committee "questions that assumption." The analysis the House committee asked for would have answered the question both committees have now raised; it has not been provided.

RECOMMENDATION 10 — No reduction in service to VIA communities

WHAT THE COMMITTEE ASKED FOR

That the Government of Canada and VIA HFR-VIA TGF Inc. ensure that HFR does not result in a reduction of service to communities currently served by VIA Rail and that VIA's regional rail services be connected to the future HFR service wherever possible.

STATUS AS OF MAY 2026

Not committed to. ALTO's published materials refer to "optimization" of existing VIA services but contain no binding commitment that current VIA-served communities will retain service at present levels. The bipartisan House committee request, the Senate committee's February 2026 concern, and the questioning from members in committee (including MP Dan Muys on February 23, 2026,

RECOMMENDATION 10 — No reduction in service to VIA communities

on VIA reliability in the same corridor) all point at the same unanswered question.

Other Recommendations Worth Noting

Four additional recommendations from the report are worth flagging briefly, as they touch on questions the Initiative has documented elsewhere.

- **Recommendation 5** asked the government to look to publicly operated HSR systems in Spain, Switzerland, Austria, and Germany. These systems witnesses are repeatedly identified as having delivered better cost and labour outcomes than the U.K. private-rail model. The procurement that followed (Cadence: CDPQ Infra, AtkinsRéalis, Systra, Keolis) was a private-led P3 structure. The public-operator comparison the committee asked for has not been published.
- **Recommendation 7** asked that the design of the future service be “centred on the objective of providing a mode of transportation that is competitive with travel by car and by air, in order to maximize modal shift.” ALTO’s published station decisions (including those that locate stations outside downtown cores in several cities) bear directly on this objective; the modal-shift analysis the committee called for has not been published, and CRI’s companion brief *The Last Mile* examines what the station decisions imply for door-to-door travel time.
- **Recommendation 9** asked that travel time between municipalities served by the network be calculated downtown-to-downtown, including transit connections. ALTO’s public travel-time figures continue to be quoted station-to-station rather than door-to-door.
- **Recommendation 14** asked that “a governance mechanism be quickly put in place to make coordinated decisions, thus allowing effective communication and collaboration with cities.” The current governance architecture, examined in CRI’s brief *What We Know About ALTO’s Reporting and Accountability*, places ALTO under the Financial Administration Act Part X regime (a regime designed for parent Crown corporations such as Canada Post) without enabling legislation specific to the project.

What Happened to the Report

The committed response

Transport Canada’s own internal briefing materials prepared for the Deputy Minister in October 2024 stated, regarding the TRAN report:

The Standing Committee on Transportation, Infrastructure and Communities has just tabled its report entitled Issues and Opportunities: High Frequency Rail in the Toronto to Quebec City Corridor, to which the Government of Canada intends to provide a formal response this Fall/Winter.

Transport Canada, Deputy Minister briefing materials (TRAN), October 10, 2024.

The commitment was made in writing. The response was never tabled.

The marketing-led pivot

The HFR-to-HSR redesignation was not, on the documentary record now public, a single decision taken in mid-December 2024. It was the culmination of an internal rebranding process that had been under way since at least September 2023, three months before the TRAN committee began its second year of hearings, and a full year before the report was tabled.

Documents obtained under Access to Information by The Canadian Press, published on May 28, 2025, set out the sequence. In September 2023, VIA HFR–VIA TGF Inc. signed a contract with the Quebec-based marketing firm Cossette Communication Inc. to develop a “brand narrative” and a tagline for a shift to high speed. In the same month, the corporation asked the three qualified procurement bidders to “propose a second option without speed limitations.” The Cossette contract was extended multiple times through the end of 2024; invoices show more than \$330,000 billed between October 2023 and January 2025.

An undated briefing note, written in late 2023 or early 2024, makes the case for the rebrand in explicitly opinion-management terms:

“The concept of ‘high frequency’ faces strong opposition. There’s widespread disinterest and dissatisfaction associated with the term, hindering any meaningful discussions and support. This resistance has become particularly challenging to navigate as the term ‘high frequency’ is directly embedded in the (corporation’s) name.” The note adds that discussions of higher speed “are met with openness,” leading to “greater project support and acceptance,” and that the name should be changed early in the process while public awareness of the project is “relatively low.”

VIA HFR–VIA TGF Inc., internal briefing note (late 2023 or early 2024). Reported by The Canadian Press, May 28, 2025.

A December 2023 Cossette presentation listed three candidate names: Inter, XLR, and Trax. An April 2024 VIA HFR presentation shows the corporation had selected “Alto,” describing it as a name that “embodies the project’s stronger focus on incorporating higher speeds” and “evokes music and the train as catalysts for connection.” Internally, while the work continued, the new name was handled under the code “Tracks.” An August 2024 internal presentation cited public-opinion research showing that people preferred a higher-speed line, and reinforced the marketing

direction: “We must continue to shift away from the high frequency narrative to keep the public and stakeholders engaged.”

The marketing-led case found receptive audiences along the corridor. After the February 2025 public announcement of Alto and the Cadence design contract, Quebec City Mayor Bruno Marchand said in an interview that he was “very happy” with the decision, and described the previous High Frequency Rail project as “crap.” The reception confirms the public-engagement logic the briefing notes had set out: openness to higher speeds, scepticism of the high-frequency framing. What the marketing analysis did not contain — and what the parliamentary process the committee had set in motion was meant to produce — was the cost analysis, preparatory-documents release, and VIA-impact study that would have allowed the public-engagement case to be set against the technical, financial, and service-continuity questions before the project moved forward.

By the time TRAN Report 18 was tabled in September 2024, “Alto” had been selected. By the time Transport Canada committed in October 2024 to a formal response “this Fall/Winter,” a name change driven by marketing analysis was substantially complete internally. The decision document AY-2024-537411 (December 16, 2024) records a formal designation of an outcome that the internal documentary record had already been pointing toward for fifteen months. Bill C-15 received royal assent on March 26, 2026 without any of this internal process — including the public-opinion analysis on which the marketing-led case for the rebrand rested — being placed before Parliament for substantive scrutiny.

Branding makeovers for transit projects are not unusual. Saskatoon spent \$317,000 on a city bus rebrand in 2024; the city responded to criticism by noting that the cost was in line with similar projects. What makes the ALTO rebrand worth setting out in this brief is not the dollar figure of the marketing contract. It is that the rebrand was the documented vehicle for a change in the project’s technical specification — from HFR (the question the committee studied) to HSR (the project that received royal assent) — without the cost analysis, the document release, or the public-deliberation process that the committee had asked for to accompany such a change.

The prorogation

On January 6, 2025, the 1st session of the 44th Parliament was prorogued.

Under House of Commons procedure, prorogation has specific procedural consequences. The House’s own Standing Committee on Audit and Oversight (SAMA) describes the effect plainly in its public materials: “as soon as Parliament is either prorogued or dissolved, all committee activity ceases and, as such, all orders of reference and committee studies lapse. No committee may sit during a prorogation. The only aspect of a committee’s work which survives prorogation is a request for a government response to a committee report.”

The phrase “only aspect ... which survives” is important. The request to respond survives. The response itself, if it has not been tabled, does not. The committee that asked for the response no

longer exists in the form that asked for it; the question can be revived only by a successor committee in the new session adopting it as its own, which did not happen.

Bill C-15

The 45th Parliament was summoned on May 26, 2025. Bill C-15 (the Budget Implementation Act, 2025, No. 1) was tabled in November 2025 and received royal assent on March 26, 2026. Division 1 of Part 5 of that Act enacted the High-Speed Rail Network Act, granting the project federal s.92(10)(c) declaration, designating ALTO an Agent of the Crown, and modifying the standard Expropriation Act regime for project-related acquisitions. The Senate Standing Committee on Transport and Communications conducted a subject-matter study of the relevant divisions and reported on February 12, 2026; this was hurried subject-matter work on legislation already in motion, not the deliberative pre-legislative work TRAN had been doing on the same project a year and a half earlier.

Bill C-15 received royal assent without the cost analysis Recommendation 4 had asked for, without the Joint Project Office report Recommendation 6 had asked for, without the VIA-impact analysis Recommendation 8 had asked for, and without the commitment to non-reduction of VIA service Recommendation 10 had asked for. The committee that had asked these questions did not formally exist when the legislation was enacted, and no successor body in either chamber had revived the unanswered recommendations as part of the C-15 review.

Why the Erasure Matters

Prorogation is a normal feature of Westminster parliamentary government. It is not, in itself, exceptional. What is worth examining is the combination of three things — a substantive bipartisan committee report, an explicit government commitment to respond, and a project redesignation followed by prorogation in the narrow window between the commitment and its fulfilment — and the result that the questions remain unanswered eighteen months later.

On cost. The committee asked specifically for the cost difference between HFR and HSR. The redesignation rendered that comparison particularly important: it was no longer a hypothetical, but the actual policy choice the government was about to make. The comparison was not produced. The \$60–90 billion figure in Q-923, classified by ALTO itself as an AACE Class 5 estimate (–50%/+100% accuracy), now stands as the public record on ALTO's cost.

On preparatory work. The committee asked for the Joint Project Office's full, unredacted report. The work it had commissioned and paid for — \$18 million in engineering studies, consultancies, and financial advice — remains outside public view. ALTO is proceeding on the basis of analysis the public, including parliamentarians, has not seen.

On VIA. The committee asked twice — once for analysis, once for commitment — that the dedicated line not reduce VIA service to existing communities. The analysis has not been

produced. The commitment has not been given. The Senate’s 2026 committee identified the same question in its review of C-15. Members from multiple parties (including MP Dan Muys on February 23, 2026) have raised the underlying corridor-service concern. The question has been asked at least three times across two chambers; it has not been answered.

On the procurement model. The committee asked for analysis of successful publicly operated HSR systems before the procurement model was locked in. The procurement proceeded with a private-led P3 structure (Cadence) before the analysis the committee called for was produced.

The TRAN committee asked the right questions in the right order: cost analysis before the procurement was locked in, preparatory documents released before the project advanced, VIA-service impact studied before a dedicated line was built. The corporation it asked had, by then, already been paying a marketing firm for a year to rebrand the project in a different direction. The procedural sequence that followed — the unmet October 2024 commitment, the formal December 2024 designation document, the January 2025 prorogation, and the eventual royal assent of legislation enacted without the committee’s recommendations being answered — meant that the question of whether the rebrand should have been accompanied by the analyses the committee had asked for never had to be answered substantively before the project moved forward. None of these events is uniquely attributable to any one government, party, or process. What is documented here is that, taken together, they produced an outcome in which a \$60–90 billion infrastructure commitment was given its enabling legislation without the parliamentary scrutiny the public record shows Parliament’s own committee had asked for.

Is This Reversible?

The erasure of TRAN Report 18 is procedural rather than substantive. The witness evidence remains in the parliamentary record. The recommendations remain in the tabled report. The unanswered questions remain unanswered, but they have not become unaskable. Several mechanisms exist within current parliamentary process by which the committee’s work could be revived and the recommendations brought back into active consideration.

- **The current TRAN committee** in the 45th Parliament could adopt a motion to revive the relevant recommendations from Report 18, formally request the government response that was not provided in the 44th Parliament, and update the recommendations to reflect the redesignation of the project from HFR to HSR. This would not require new witness hearings; the underlying evidence is already on the record.
- **A Senate motion** could request that the government provide responses to the substantive recommendations of TRAN Report 18 that bear on questions now governed by the High-Speed Rail Network Act. The Senate’s February 2026 TRCM Second Report already noted several of the same concerns; a follow-up motion explicitly tying those concerns to the unanswered House recommendations would establish bicameral pressure.

- **Order Paper questions** can ask, directly, why specific recommendations have not been answered. Q-923 (Lawrence) and Q-1191 (Reid) have already begun this work in the 45th Parliament; expanding the line of questioning to explicitly name the recommendations of Report 18 would put the procedural-erasure question on the parliamentary record.
- **Access to Information** applications can be brought to bear on the Joint Project Office's report, the December 16, 2024 HFR-to-HSR briefing note (AY-2024-537411), and the underlying technical material that Recommendation 6 had asked be made public. These are sympathetic targets for ATI work because Parliament's own committee has already formally requested their release.

None of these mechanisms requires the government's cooperation. Each is available to opposition members of either chamber, and to citizens whose ATI rights cover the underlying documents. The erasure of the report is reversible if the political will to revive it exists.

Where Things Stand

As of May 2026, eighteen recommendations from a substantive, bipartisan, evidence-based committee report on the central project at the centre of Canada's largest current public infrastructure commitment remain procedurally erased and substantively unanswered. The project they were written about has changed; the questions they asked have not been answered; the parliamentary record on the project is materially thinner than it would otherwise have been.

This brief is offered as a reference document for federal decision-makers, parliamentarians, journalists, and constituents tracking the file. It is intended to make clear, in plain comparative form, what the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities asked for in September 2024, what happened to those requests, and what the project would look like today if the questions had been answered before the project moved forward.

Sources

House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. Issues and Opportunities: High Frequency Rail in the Toronto to Quebec City Corridor. 18th Report, 44th Parliament, 1st Session. Tabled September 2024. Chair: Peter Schiefke; Vice-Chairs: Mark Strahl, Xavier Barsalou-Duval.

Transport Canada. Deputy Minister briefing materials (TRAN), October 10, 2024. Online at tc.canada.ca.

House of Commons Standing Committee on Audit and Oversight (SAMA). Public materials on the procedural effects of prorogation, 44th Parliament. Online at parl.ca.

Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications. Second Report on Bill C-15 (subject-matter study of Divisions 1, 2, 24, 28 and 29 of Part 5), February 12, 2026.

Budget Implementation Act, 2025, No. 1 (Bill C-15), Statutes of Canada 2026, c. 3. Royal assent March 26, 2026. The High-Speed Rail Network Act is enacted as Division 1 of Part 5.

Order Paper Question Q-923, 45th Parliament, 1st session. Asked by Philip Lawrence (MP for Northumberland–Clarke), March 5, 2026; answered by the Minister of Transport and Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, April 22, 2026.

The Canadian Press, “Via Rail subsidiary paid Quebec marketing firm \$330K as it pivoted to high-speed rail,” May 28, 2025. The Globe and Mail published a parallel report on the same Access to Information disclosures the same day. The reporting includes verbatim excerpts from internal VIA HFR–VIA TGF Inc. briefing notes and Cossette Communication Inc. presentations referenced in this brief.

ALTO HSR Citizen Research Initiative, Reading the Footnote (May 2026), Reading the Answer (May 2026), and What We Know About ALTO’s Reporting and Accountability (May 2026) — the companion briefs on cost framing, parliamentary disclosure, and accountability architecture respectively.

ALTO HSR Citizen Research Initiative — citizenresearch.ca — May 2026