

A Friendly Witness

How a supportive submission to ALTO lists the things the project cannot deliver

On the memoir filed by Trajectoire Québec, 24 April 2026
Assessed against the Initiative's research record

Trajectoire Québec — a Quebec transit-users' advocacy organization active for more than four decades — filed a supportive memoir to ALTO's consultation on 24 April 2026. It endorses high-speed rail. But the nine recommendations that carry the endorsement describe downtown stations, affordable fares, more intermediate stops, preserved conventional service, and seamless integration with local networks. That is the specification of a high-frequency conventional railway. It is not what a 300 km/h greenfield line is built to be. Read against ALTO's actual design, the friendliest submission on the file becomes a list of the project's gaps.

An endorsement, and what it rests on

Trajectoire was an early backer of VIA Rail's high-frequency proposal (the **TGF**). Its memoir now supports high-speed rail — but conditionally, “*dans la mesure où*” the project delivers accessibility, integration, and equity. The memoir's own narrative traces the shift from high-frequency to high-speed not to a technical or economic case but to a 2024 opinion poll it cites — 92 per cent preferring high-speed over high-frequency — and to the stated preferences of local mayors. What the organization asks for did not change when its endorsement did. It wanted a frequent, reliable, affordable, well-connected interurban railway before the pivot, and it wants one still. The recommendations describe that railway. The endorsement sits on top of it.

Nine recommendations, assessed

The memoir's own summary lists nine recommendations. Set against the design ALTO is actually advancing and against the Initiative's research record, they resolve into a consistent pattern.

#	Recommendation (abridged)	Assessment
1	Downtown stations, universally accessible, integrated with local and interurban networks	Structural conflict
2	Urban integration with no impassable barriers for pedestrians and cyclists	Structural conflict
3	Affordable and accessible to all	Contrary to the economics

4	Tight cost control; private participation if needed; no crowding-out of urban transit	Contrary to the economics
5	Stations at Montréal-Trudeau (YUL) and Québec / Jean-Lesage (YQB) airports	Not in the plan
6	Amend ALTO's mandate to provide more intermediate stations	Against the premise
7	Preserve and improve conventional interurban service on the existing network	Unaddressed
8	European / Asian-standard passenger experience, distinct from air travel	Open
9	Secure social acceptability through rigorous, proactive consultation	Failing

Downtown access and urban integration (1 and 2). The clearest conflicts. An alignment engineered for the 250+ km/h speeds that all three RFP bidders independently proposed — a finding confirmed by PCO briefing note A-2025-00015 — must be fully grade-separated and fenced along its length. That severance *is* the impassable barrier Recommendation 2 asks the project to avoid; it is a condition of running trains at that speed, not an incidental feature. The same physics pushes stations outward: high-speed track cannot be threaded into dense downtowns at a cost the project will bear, which drives stations toward the periphery rather than the core. Trajectoire's own examples — the pull of the downtown Palais station over Sainte-Foy in Québec, the car-inducing effect of Ottawa's out-of-centre station — are cautionary tales ALTO's design tends toward, not away from. The Initiative's forward friction measure captures the gap in a single comparison: a high-performance spine scores roughly 29 against ALTO's ~65.

Affordability and cost discipline (3 and 4). Trajectoire cites an external cost range of \$60–100 billion-plus. The Initiative's own reference-class regression puts ALTO nearer \$143 million per kilometre at the central estimate, within a 95 per cent prediction interval of \$76–264 billion, against a benefit-cost ratio around 0.07. A project carrying those economics and the low ridership the reference-class work implies — about 0.29 trips per capita — faces structural pressure toward premium, cost-recovery fares, the opposite of the equity pricing Recommendation 3 requires. And Recommendation 4's specific fear, that the project crowds out federal investment in urban transit, is precisely the fiscal displacement those economics point to. Nothing in the record indicates the tight cost control the recommendation asks for.

Station count (5 and 6). Every intermediate stop erodes the journey-time advantage that is the sole justification for choosing a 300 km/h greenfield line over higher-frequency upgrades to the existing corridor. Recommendation 6 — that Ottawa amend ALTO's mandate to add stations — therefore asks the government to partially unwind the project's premise. Trajectoire half-concedes the tension, proposing passing loops so express trains can overtake local ones; that is a workaround for a conflict built into the concept. Airport stations (Recommendation 5) are, as far as the public plan shows, not included.

The existing network (7). A separate greenfield passenger line does nothing, on its own, to preserve or improve VIA's conventional corridor service — the very service Trajectoire once championed under the high-frequency banner. The Initiative has documented a quiet benchmark substitution in ALTO's costing material, where the high-frequency baseline is replaced by an undifferentiated “Conventional Rail,” a sign the existing-network comparator is being handled loosely rather than protected. The dual-asset approach

that would satisfy this recommendation — a new passenger spine that also frees the legacy network for improved conventional and freight service — is the HPR framework's central move. ALTO does not offer it.

The two open questions. Passenger experience (Recommendation 8) is an operational choice made late in delivery; the record gives no signal either way, and it is fair to call it undetermined. Consultation (Recommendation 9) is the sharpest of all. Community friction, on the Initiative's index, rose from 43 to 54 after the consultation round — the process increased opposition rather than building the acceptability the recommendation demands. A supportive organization's polite call for rigorous, proactive consultation is, measured against that movement, a finding that the consultation so far has failed its own test.

Asked what would make ALTO succeed, its supporters described a high-frequency railway. The endorsement of high-speed rail sits on top of a specification high-speed rail cannot meet.

The pattern

Set the recommendations beside one another and a single shape emerges. Downtown access, more stops, affordable fares, network integration, preserved conventional service: item by item, this is the value proposition of high-frequency conventional rail — the case the Initiative advances under the HPR framework — restated by an organization that believes it is endorsing something else. The friendliest witness on the consultation record describes the project by what it lacks. That is worth noting precisely *because* the witness is friendly: the gap between what ALTO is and what its supporters want is not a partisan artifact. It is visible even to those cheering the train on.

What is structural, and what is not

Two of the adverse verdicts turn on ALTO's evolving plans rather than on physics. Whether airport connections appear (Recommendation 5) and how central the endpoint stations finally sit are contingent on decisions ALTO has not fully published; both could improve. The remaining assessments follow from the design itself — the severance and peripheral siting a grade-separated 250+ km/h alignment entails, and the cost and ridership economics established in the Initiative's reference-class work. Those do not move with the plan. They move only with the choice of technology.

SOURCE

Trajectoire Québec, *Train à grande vitesse entre Québec et Toronto : une occasion à saisir pour améliorer les transports interurbains au Québec*. Memoir presented to ALTO, 24 April 2026.

<https://trajectoire.quebec/publication/train-grande-vitesse-entre-quebec-toronto-une-occasion-saisir-pour-ameliorer-transports>