The Stations That Aren’t There

The tourism ALTO’s line leaves at the station — and the small-town visitor economy an integrated network could reach instead.

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A SHORT LIST OF CITY STOPS

ALTO’s mandate fixes seven stations — Toronto, Peterborough, Ottawa, Laval, Montréal, Trois-Rivières, and Québec City — only five of them between the endpoints, and every one a city rather than a recreational town. To hold 300+ km/h, the dedicated new alignment stops as little as possible: the original eastern-Ontario option ran a straight line with no stop between Peterborough and Ottawa.

After consultation, the government signalled in June 2026 a strong preference for a more southerly route nearer Highway 401 with a potential Kingston stop, keeping the northern corridor alive but deprioritised; the final alignment is still being assessed. Either way the pattern holds, a handful of city stops, and access by car: ALTO’s own pitch is that most residents east of Peterborough would be within a 25-minute drive of a station. The small towns and shorelines that draw the corridor’s leisure travel sit off the line.

CRITICAL FINDING

ALTO frames tourism as a metro-connectivity product: faster links between big cities. But the corridor’s large, capturable, and better-distributed tourism opportunity is the opposite trip: domestic leisure travel from the four metros out to smaller towns and recreational areas. That market is already huge, overwhelmingly intra-provincial, mostly same-day, and almost entirely car-dependent.

This is not small towns instead of big cities. A faster, more reliable High Performance trunk improves the metro trip too, most of the way, since the large gain is over today’s freight-delayed VIA service, not over ALTO. An integrated network reaches the metro market and the small-town market; ALTO’s express spine reaches the first, marginally faster, and by geometry bypasses the second.

On transparent, adjustable assumptions (a fifteen-minute station catchment, scenario ranges for capture and induced demand), an integrated network could plausibly generate an illustrative band of roughly $30 million to $640 million a year in net-new, locally-retained small-town tourism spending. These are scenario figures, not a forecast.

THE MARKET

A large market, already on the road

1 in 3

domestic trips is for holidays, leisure or recreation — the market ALTO's frame overlooks

STATCAN NTS

~14%

of domestic travel spending goes to gas and vehicle operation — the leisure market is car-locked

STATCAN NTS

~$200M

illustrative central net-new small-town tourism per year an integrated network could capture (band ~$30M–$640M)

INITIATIVE SCENARIO

The domestic leisure market the corridor sits inside is very large. About one in three domestic trips by Canadians is for holidays, leisure or recreation, on the order of ninety-five million such trips nationally in a normal pre-pandemic year. Travel within Canada has since climbed to new highs, with tens of billions of dollars spent each quarter.

In Ontario, domestic travellers made roughly 116 million visits in a recent full year, over 93 per cent of them Ontarians travelling within their own province; Quebec is the second most-visited province. Most of this travel is same-day (in Ontario about two-thirds) and a same-day trip already means a journey of at least forty kilometres each way.

And it is car travel. Gas and vehicle operation is consistently one of the three largest categories of domestic travel spending, at around 14 per cent. Per-visit spending is modest (same-day visits average roughly $70 in Ontario and $75 in Quebec) but the volume is the story.

This is the demand pool. It is intra-provincial, high-frequency, price-sensitive, and today almost entirely dependent on the private car. This is precisely the market a convenient, well-priced, integrated rail network could convert, and precisely the market a metro-to-metro express line does not address.

THE GEOGRAPHY

Where the leisure map meets the line

The test the Initiative applied is simple: which of the corridor's recreational regions fall within a fifteen-minute reach of a station ALTO is mandated to build? On that test, most do not.

RECREATIONAL REGION	RELATIONSHIP TO THE ALTO LINE
Prince Edward County (ON)	No station. The nearest existing rail town, Belleville, is bypassed by the alignment. Unserved.
Thousand Islands / Gananoque (ON)	Hinges on the Kingston stop, under assessment since June 2026 on the preferred southern route. If confirmed, Kingston would interconnect the existing VIA station and serve as a genuine gateway — though access stays a drive-to-station model. Conditional.

RECREATIONAL REGION	RELATIONSHIP TO THE ALTO LINE
Northumberland shore — Cobourg, Port Hope (ON)	The line routes inland via Peterborough, away from the lakeshore towns and their existing rail. Unserved.
Kawarthas (ON)	Peterborough is a mandated stop and a genuine gateway. Served.
Rideau corridor — Perth, Westport, Smiths Falls (ON)	Off the alignment; no station. Unserved.
Eastern Townships / Cantons-de-l'Est (QC)	South of Montréal, off the Québec-bound line. Unserved.
Mauricie (QC)	Trois-Rivières is a mandated stop and a gateway. Served.
Charlevoix (QC)	Northeast of Québec City, far beyond the line's end. Unserved.
Laurentians / Mont-Tremblant (QC)	North of Laval; the resort areas lie well beyond any mandated station. Unserved.

Three of the stops are real recreational gateways, and this brief counts them as such: Peterborough for the Kawarthas, Trois-Rivières for the Mauricie, and — if confirmed — Kingston for the Thousand Islands. But even among these, ALTO's own materials place Peterborough and Trois-Rivières at the city's edge, near highways rather than in the centre; only a Kingston stop, reusing the existing VIA station, would set a visitor down in the town itself. The pattern is nonetheless clear: the station set is a list of cities, and whether the eastern-Ontario segment runs north or on the preferred southern line, it stops at cities and passes the belt of small towns and shorelines where corridor residents actually spend their leisure time.

THE MECHANISM

An express spine concentrates; it does not distribute

Two features of a 300+ km/h line work against dispersed tourism. The first is stop spacing. High speed is only worth building if the train rarely stops; every added station erodes the time saving that justifies the cost. A line optimised for Toronto–Montréal in about three hours cannot also be a network of small-town halts, the two objectives are in direct tension, and the metros win.

The second is the straw effect (sometimes the tunnel effect), one of the better-documented findings in high-speed-rail economics: fast, few-stop lines tend to concentrate activity in their terminal cities and can draw it out of the places they pass. For tourism specifically, a traveller moved from metro to metro in three hours has no reason to stop in between, and the towns without a platform capture nothing. The honest reading is therefore not that ALTO is merely unhelpful to small-town tourism, but that its geometry can be actively adverse to it.

An integrated High Performance network works the other way. A trunk at 180–240 km/h on existing corridors, with regional feeders and timed local connections, trades a little top speed for many more points of access — and it is the access, not the speed, that unlocks the leisure trip.

COULDN'T ALTO JUST ADD THE LAST-MILE LINKS?

It could, and it says it will: ALTO has publicly stated it wants the network interconnected with the REM and metro in Montréal and Laval, the LRT and VIA in Ottawa, and the same in Kingston. Municipal and regional-transit integration is a policy choice open to any operator, not a property of one technology. But last-mile links work on top of stations — they amplify access at stops that exist; they cannot create a stop where the line does not run. And ALTO's own access model is drive-to-station: its selling point for the Kingston option is that most residents east of Peterborough would be within a 25-minute drive of a platform — car-dependent access, the opposite of the car-free leisure trip. The binding constraint is the number and placement of stops, and no shuttle programme changes it.

THE COMPARISON IS BOTH-AND, NOT EITHER-OR

High Performance Rail does not trade the metro trip away to reach the small towns; it improves both. A more frequent, more reliable trunk on dedicated track would substantially boost metro-to-metro leisure travel over today's freight-delayed VIA service — and most of that gain comes from leaving freight-priority track, not from the final increment of speed. The Initiative's own analysis finds ALTO's extra 17 to 25 minutes per city pair is a small addition to a benefit High Performance Rail has already largely captured. So an integrated network reaches the metro market and the small-town market; ALTO reaches the first, marginally faster, and forecloses the second.

EVEN WHERE ALTO STOPS, THE PLATFORM TENDS TO SIT OUTSIDE THE CENTRE

The design privileges speed over central access, and the station choices show it. The one true downtown terminal, Montréal, depends on a tunnel of more than ten kilometres under the Rivière des Prairies and Mount Royal — costed by a McGill analysis at over a billion dollars a kilometre, some 12 to 18 per cent of the whole $60–90 billion budget. As the single most expensive discrete element on the line, with a suburban Laval station already built into the first phase, it is the obvious thing to defer or drop if costs run over — as, on megaproject form, they will. The others already point the same way: by ALTO's own CEO, Toronto's first station will be suburban, opening ahead of any downtown stop; the Transport Minister has set aside the historic downtown Ottawa station on cost and geology grounds; Québec City's central Gare du Palais is largely ruled out as too slow; and Peterborough, Trois-Rivières and Laval are sited near highways and open land to hold the 300 km/h line. Should the Montréal tunnel go the way of the others, not one of the four major anchors would be left with a secure downtown station. Where the design builds fresh for speed, the platform lands outside town and the visitor arrives by car — the opposite of the car-free leisure trip. The one honest exception is reuse: at Ottawa's Tremblay hub and a possible Kingston on the VIA line, ALTO leans on an existing transit-connected station and access works — which is exactly the High Performance model of keeping the platform where the town already is.

THE ESTIMATE

A transparent scenario, not a forecast

The following is deliberately built as visible arithmetic. Every input is a parameter the reader can change; the three columns are a low, central, and high scenario rather than a single prediction. The catchment is set at the fifteen-minute reach used for the geography test above.

PARAMETER (ANNUAL, AT MATURITY)	LOW	CENTRAL	HIGH
Addressable leisure-trip pool — metro origin, within 15 min of a networked station	3.0M	6.0M	9.0M
× Rail capture of addressable car trips	10%	20%	30%
= Shifted rail trips	0.30M	1.20M	2.70M
× Induced-demand uplift	+10%	+25%	+40%
= Rail leisure trips at maturity	0.33M	1.50M	3.78M
× Net local spend per trip (blended)	$90	$130	$170
= Annual net-new local tourism spend	**~$30M**	**~$195M**	**~$640M**

Illustrative scenario arithmetic. Each parameter is an input, not an observation; the central column is one plausible path through the band, not a point forecast. Pool figures represent a single-digit-millions slice of the corridor's tens of millions of annual leisure trips.

Read as a band, an integrated network plausibly captures somewhere between a few tens of millions and roughly $640 million a year in net-new, locally-retained small-town tourism spending, with a central illustrative figure near $200 million. What matters for the comparison with ALTO is not that the high scenario approaches ALTO's $800 million claim, but that these are net-new and locally-retained dollars — not the gross, un-netted, metro-concentrated figure ALTO reports — and that they land in the communities the express line bypasses.

THE REFERENCE CLASS

Integration is the unlock — the Swiss test

The case that rail can distribute tourism to small towns is not hypothetical; it is the everyday reality of the most integrated networks. Switzerland is the standing proof of concept: timed-transfer scheduling, a single ticketing system, and regional and postbus connections that reach valley and lakeside towns make car-free leisure travel the default rather than the exception, and tourism spending is spread across small communities precisely because the network reaches and connects them. The United Kingdom's community-rail partnerships show the same mechanism at modest scale, turning secondary lines into local visitor economies.

The reference class also carries its warning, which this brief states plainly: where fast lines are built without that integration, the straw effect can leave intermediate places worse off, as parts of the Japanese experience show. It is integration — ticketing, timed connections, and last-mile links — not

raw speed, that determines whether rail distributes tourism or concentrates it. That is a choice about network design, and it is the choice an express spine makes in one direction and an integrated High Performance network makes in the other.

THE CONDITION

The benefit is conditional, and the brief says so

This estimate carries a load-bearing assumption, and honesty requires naming it. The entire small-town dividend depends on the last mile actually existing: a train to a rural station accomplishes little if the visitor still needs a car on arrival. The captured trips in the scenario above are conditional on shuttles, regional transit, bike and e-bike hire, and timed connections being built and funded alongside the line. Where that integration is absent, capture rates collapse toward the low column. This requirement is not unique to the alternative — ALTO's own city stations need last-mile links too, and it is pursuing them; the difference is reach, since integration can only amplify the stops a network has, and an integrated network simply has more of them, closer to the destinations.

Three further limits keep the estimate disciplined. Some premier recreational areas — dispersed cottage country, backcountry, and lakes reached only by private road — are intrinsically car-shaped and fall outside the addressable set at any catchment. Leisure demand is sharply peaked by season and weekend, which is capacity-inefficient and weakens the operating economics rather than strengthening them. And the induced-demand component is the softest parameter in the model; over-reading it would repeat exactly the optimism bias the Initiative documents in ALTO's own forecasts. The scenario is built to resist that temptation, which is why the low column is deliberately austere.

WHERE THINGS STAND · JULY 2026

Summary ledger

On the tourism question, measured against ALTO's own framing:

OVERLOOKED	Market — one in three domestic trips is leisure, and the corridor's small-town leisure economy is large and car-locked. ALTO's frame addresses metro-to-metro travel, not this market.
BYPASSED	Geography — most recreational regions fall outside a fifteen-minute reach of any ALTO station; whether the line runs north or on the preferred southern route, it stops only at cities. Peterborough, Trois-Rivières, and (if confirmed) Kingston are the exceptions.
ADVERSE	Mechanism — an express spine concentrates activity in hub cities and can draw it out of bypassed towns (the straw effect), rather than distributing it.
AVAILABLE	Alternative — an integrated High Performance network reaches the metro market (most of ALTO's benefit, over VIA) and the small-town market: an illustrative central ~$200M a year in net-new local spend, band ~$30M–$640M.

CONDITIONAL	Condition — the dividend is contingent on last-mile integration being built and funded; absent it, capture falls to the low scenario.

> *ALTO reports an $800 million annual tourism benefit as a gross figure, concentrated in the metros its line connects. This brief does not dispute that rail generates tourism value between the metros — High Performance Rail delivers most of that too, over today's VIA service, and at a fraction of the cost. It adds the value ALTO leaves out: the leisure trip out of the city to the small town. One approach captures both markets; the other captures the first, marginally faster, and skips the second. The difference is a network built to stop, not a spine built to skip.*

SOURCES

Documents and data

1. ALTO, Frequently Asked Questions and About Alto — the seven federally mandated stations (Toronto, Peterborough, Ottawa, Laval, Montréal, Trois-Rivières, Québec City). altotrain.ca
2. CBC News, coverage of the ALTO route, schedule and land-access surveys, March 2026 — station list, Ottawa–Montréal first phase, and concerns from communities on existing rail routes.
3. The Canadian Press, "Toronto area could get two high-speed rail stations," April 30, 2026 — seven mandated stops, a possible eighth in the Toronto suburbs, and the 72-trains-per-day service concept.
4. CBC News and Ottawa Business Journal, June 22–23, 2026 — the government's stated preference for a southern route with a potential Kingston stop interconnecting VIA, the "25-minute drive" catchment claim, and ALTO's stated intent to connect with the REM, metro, LRT and VIA.
5. Station-siting reporting, 2026: ALTO network map (Peterborough near major roadways with bus connections; a northern approach studied at Trois-Rivières owing to downtown density; a Mount Royal tunnel to reach downtown Montréal). The Canadian Press and The Globe and Mail on Toronto's suburban-first station opening ahead of a downtown stop; The Globe and Mail and CBC on the Transport Minister setting aside the historic downtown Ottawa station in favour of the existing Tremblay VIA/O-Train hub; and Imbleau largely ruling out Québec City's Gare du Palais. On the downtown Montréal tunnel — more than ten kilometres, costed by a McGill analysis via The Canadian Press at over CA$1 billion per kilometre, or 12 to 18 per cent of the project budget (trains.com).
6. Statistics Canada, National Travel Survey — domestic leisure-trip volumes, same-day share, mode, and expenditure categories (including gas and vehicle operation). Tables 24-10-0070-01 and 24-10-0071-01.
7. Statistics Canada, The Daily, National Travel Survey and Visitor Travel Survey, 2025 quarters — recent domestic tourism spending and per-visit averages for Ontario and Quebec.
8. Reference class (qualitative): the Swiss integrated rail and travel system (timed transfers, single ticketing, regional and postbus links); the United Kingdom's Community Rail Partnerships; and the high-speed-rail "straw / tunnel effect" literature, including Japanese Shinkansen studies.
9. ALTO HSR Citizen Research Initiative, modal-shift research notes and the scenario methodology set out in this brief — fifteen-minute station catchment, and low / central / high ranges for rail capture, induced demand, and per-trip local spend.