A Case for Frequency

Steven Guilbeault's Toronto Star op-ed argues that ALTO is the right plan for Canada. Read against the published record, the evidence it offers supports frequent, reliable trains on dedicated passenger track, and does not test ALTO against that option.

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1 — The op-ed and the question it answers

On 22 November 2026 the Toronto Star published an opinion piece by Steven Guilbeault, identified in its byline as the Liberal member of Parliament for Laurier–Sainte-Marie and former minister of environment and climate change (2021–2025). The piece sets out a personal and environmental case for high-speed rail in the Toronto–Québec City corridor, and defends ALTO on four fronts: the choice of high-speed over high-frequency rail, the consultation process, the treatment of farmland, and the size of the travel market.

The Initiative shares the goal the op-ed states: moving intercity travel out of cars and planes. This brief does not argue against fast trains in principle. It asks a narrower question: **does the evidence the op-ed offers support this plan over the alternatives?** Each section takes one of the op-ed's claims, sets it beside the published record, and states what the record implies.

2 — Frequency and capacity are conceded

The op-ed recounts that cabinet first leaned toward high-frequency rail before choosing high-speed, and states that the two options offer "similar frequencies and capacities." On the op-ed's own account, then, the frequency and capacity gains were available from either option. **What separates the two is speed alone**, and the case for ALTO over high-frequency rail is a case for that increment.

The published record on that increment is thin. ALTO's August 2026 report Canada's Moment (Table 2) prices high-frequency rail at $45–75 billion against $60–90 billion for high-speed rail; the high-frequency range carries no footnote or source. On the midpoints of those two ranges ($60 billion and $75 billion), the speed increment costs about $15 billion (an Initiative calculation from the Table 2 ranges). The journey times that speed is meant to buy were, on the record released under Access to Information request A-2025-00333, simulated only for the slowest (110 mph, 177 km/h) case; the faster 160 mph and 186 mph times are spreadsheet estimates (distance divided by average speeds benchmarked to foreign railways), which the memorandum describes as being for information and comparison.

The op-ed's own example points the same way. Its author reports taking the train for more than 90 per cent of his Montréal–Ottawa trips as a minister, on today's conventional VIA service. Montréal–Ottawa is a segment on which, by the op-ed's own figures, ALTO projects its lower range of market share (25–35 per cent). A frequent, reasonably reliable conventional train was sufficient for this traveller.

≈ $15 billion
Midpoint cost of the speed increment over high-frequency rail. Initiative calculation from Canada's Moment, Table 2.

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Speed cases actually simulated in the 2023 journey-time memorandum (A-2025-00333). The faster two are estimates.

3 — Reliability is a track-access problem

The op-ed cites VIA on-time performance of 51–59 per cent between 2022 and 2024, falling to 30 per cent in early 2025. These figures come from two different ALTO-cited sources measured on bases neither states: Canada's Moment gives 51–59 per cent for 2022–2024 (footnote 32, citing an Auditor General report to VIA's board), while CPCS's June 2026 freight study gives 72 per cent in the first quarter of 2024 falling to 30 per cent in the first quarter of 2025. They are better read as differing metrics than as one series.

On either metric, the cause is the same. VIA runs most of its corridor service on track owned and dispatched by freight railways. The Initiative's brief Canada's Rail Exceptionalism found that no G7 country grants freight statutory priority over passenger trains, and that Canada is the only G7 country with none of the three usual protections (a statutory passenger preference, a neutral infrastructure manager, an independent capacity regulator). **Dedicated passenger track removes the conflict at any design speed.** The HPR alternative's passenger spine is dedicated track with a design speed range of 177–240 km/h. Poor punctuality on shared freight track is an argument for separation; it is not, by itself, an argument for 300 km/h.

The op-ed also credits the Trudeau and Carney governments with more than $13 billion in rail investment. The figure is not broken down or sourced in the piece, so it cannot be checked here.

4 — VIA's ridership history is a service history

The op-ed notes that VIA has lost roughly half its ridership since the early 1980s, alongside the growth of the Montréal–Toronto air corridor. The Library of Parliament's 2015 background paper on VIA records ridership peaking at about 8 million in 1981, fluctuating between roughly 6 and 7 million through the rest of the decade, and the 1989–1990 restructuring (ordered to cut operating costs and subsidies) costing VIA more than 45 per cent of its ridership. Ridership then recovered slowly, to about 4.6 million in 2008.

On that record, most of the decline the op-ed describes follows reductions in the service supplied. The implication runs against the op-ed's framing: travellers have responded to how much, and how reliable, the service is. That is the variable high-frequency rail and HPR were designed to change.

5 — The market-share comparison is not like for like

The op-ed states that the corridor generates about 96 million intercity trips a year across all modes, and that ALTO's ridership model projects about 40 per cent of the market on long-distance segments and 25–35 per cent on shorter ones. It presents these as cautious next to Madrid–Barcelona, Paris–Lyon and Tokyo–Osaka, where rail has reached 35–65 per cent.

5.1 The market is smaller than the headline

ALTO's April 2026 commentary gave the figure as 95 million. The Initiative's July 2026 brief Undressing the Addressable Market shows that it counts every intercity trip, by every mode, over every distance, across the whole corridor. **The market a high-speed line can realistically serve** (the longer, station-to-station journeys where rail competes with air and car) **is roughly a quarter of it, about 25 million trips a year.** Built up from the markets a fast service actually competes for, counted rather than modelled, the brief arrives at about 2.8 to 3.5 million riders drawn from car, 1.7 to 2.0 million from air and about 3.3 million retained from VIA (its reported 2025 Corridor East ridership): about 8 to 9 million in total, the same place the Initiative's modal-shift model lands.

5.2 The European shares are not like for like

The European shares are generally reported against air alone. Spain's competition regulator, the CNMC, reports rail's long-distance share **compared to air travel** at 56.5 per cent in 2024. The Canadian

market the op-ed describes is dominated by the car: ALTO's own market analysis, as reported by the Go Alto group, puts driving at 91 per cent of Ottawa–Montréal trips and 85 per cent of Montréal–Québec City trips. If ALTO's 25–40 per cent shares are shares of all modes, the European figures are not a like-for-like benchmark, and the comparison does not show the projection to be cautious. The op-ed does not state which basis ALTO uses.

The op-ed's opening also supplies a benchmark of its own: the mid-1990s Québec Ministry of Transport study its author recalls estimated that high-speed rail would draw nearly 20 per cent of car and air travellers. ALTO's long-distance projection is roughly double that, and the piece does not say what changed. Independent estimates sit well below ALTO's 24 million annual trips by 2055:

Source	Basis	Annual riders
ALTO, Canada's Moment (Aug 2026)	ALTO ridership model, 2055	24 million
McGill TRAM (Jul 2026)	Survey n = 8,276; 2050, without / with induced demand	10.48 / 17.53 million
Initiative, Modal Shift Note 3	Ridership envelope, 2055: lower / central / upper	3.7 / 9.2 / 17.2 million
Initiative, Undressing the Addressable Market	Demand counted from car, air and retained VIA markets	≈ 8–9 million
Initiative, reference class (same brief)	Car-dependent corridors rescaled to this line; risk-adjusted floor	≈ 4–5 million

On the Initiative's envelope, ALTO's 24 million for 2055 sits about 40 per cent above the upper bound for that year (Initiative calculation: 24.0 ÷ 17.2).

The fare is the variable that decides between these figures, and ALTO has not published it. The Initiative's brief Three Claims, One Fare sets out how ALTO's ridership, benefit and cost-recovery claims all turn on that single number.

6 — The productivity benefit is the most assumption-dependent figure

The op-ed describes the productivity benefits of high-speed rail as undeniable. In the Aviseo general-equilibrium study ALTO commissioned (June 2026), productivity accounts for $21.0 billion of the $24.4 billion GDP estimate, about 86 per cent. The Initiative's brief Two Point Two Trillion shows the estimate moving from $13.8 billion to $34.5 billion as a single productivity parameter moves from 0.02 to 0.05. The headline 1.1 per cent is expressed against Canada's 2019 GDP. The productivity channel is real in principle; its size is the least settled number in ALTO's case, not the most.

7 — The consultation followed the largest decisions

The op-ed argues that a consultation cannot be called pointless when the decision it informs has not yet been made. That holds for the decision the consultation was scoped to inform: where, within a 10-kilometre study corridor, the line should run. The decisions that most affect corridor communities came first:

Date	Decision or event
19 Feb 2025	Federal government announces a high-speed (rather than high-frequency) network, with its seven stations named
26 Mar 2026	High-Speed Rail Network Act receives royal assent; Transport Canada's process summary shows a failed purchase attempt is not required of ALTO before an expropriation request

Date	Decision or event
24 Apr 2026	Consultation period closes
Jun 2026	UPA, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and the Ontario Federation of Agriculture call for a new review and ask Ottawa to release the analyses behind the choice of high-speed rail

On this sequence, the mode, the design speed and the greenfield alignment preceded the consultation, and the enabling legislation was in force before it closed. The consultation can be in good faith on the route and still not reach the questions most of its critics are asking.

8 — Farmland: the width of the line and the shape of the farm

The op-ed notes that the final right-of-way will be about 60 metres wide within the 10-kilometre study corridor, so that most farmland in the study area will not be acquired. Both figures are accurate as stated, but neither measures the impact that concerns farmers. A 60-metre line severs the farms it crosses: it divides fields, closes or diverts road crossings and lengthens routes between parcels. Transport Canada gives more than 1,000 crossings along the corridor; the Initiative's brief Counting the Crossings estimates 300 to 600 closures from that figure and the structure rates ALTO itself cites for France and Spain. Construction adds haul roads, spoil and staging beyond the final right-of-way, and the study corridor has left owners across its full width uncertain about their land for the length of the study.

The op-ed's compensation figure, up to 350 per cent of land value, rests on Radio-Canada's sources. ALTO has published how payments are assessed but not an overall multiple. Compensation at any level answers the question of fair payment. It does not answer the question farm organisations have put on the record, which is whether the line should take this land at all.

9 — The carbon case the op-ed does not make

The op-ed's case is partly environmental: it opens with the promise, in the 1990s study, of significantly reduced pollution. It gives no carbon figure for ALTO, and ALTO has published no lifecycle carbon assessment of its own. The Initiative's November 2026 carbon research, built from international evidence, engineering first principles and published studies, fills that gap.

Building ALTO is estimated to emit 14.69 Mt CO_2e in the central case, with a range of 6.87 to 29.60 Mt, incurred across the three announced phase openings. The railway repays that only to the extent its passengers would otherwise have driven or flown, and the saving arrives slowly: ridership ramps, trips are shorter than often assumed (about 430 km on a demand-weighted average), and the cars being displaced are themselves getting cleaner as the fleet electrifies.

Ridership trajectory (Modal Shift Note 3)	Carbon payback	Still owed in 2080
Lower: 6.1 million passengers by 2080	Never	12.3 Mt
Central: 12.5 million by 2080	2083 to 2110	7.0 Mt
Upper: 25.7 million by 2080	2064 to 2075	Repaid

The payback range reflects the accounting boundary, not uncertainty about the railway: 2083 when every mode carries its fuel supply chain and its manufacturing (the life-cycle boundary), 2110 when only what is emitted in travel is counted (the tailpipe boundary). The research reports both, and measures every mode the same way within each. Only the upper trajectory, which is above every independent forecast for the corridor, repays within the operating life.

Set against what else is happening on the same roads, the saving is small. The Initiative's note ALTO: A CO_2 Rounding Error puts ALTO's net fifty-year saving (2040–2089, central ridership, life-cycle boundary) at about 2.5 Mt CO_2e. Electrifying the car and light-truck fleets of Ontario and Quebec over the same period removes about 1,097 Mt; heavy-truck electrification adds 154 to 668 Mt more. ALTO is 0.14 to 0.20 per cent of the combined total, or roughly one month of it. On the lower ridership trajectory it emits more than it displaces.

14.69 Mt

Construction carbon, central estimate (range 6.87–29.60 Mt). Initiative lifecycle carbon research, Nov 2026.

0.14–0.20%

ALTO's fifty-year net saving as a share of road electrification's, Ontario and Quebec. ALTO: A CO_2 Rounding Error.

On this arithmetic, the carbon debt is set by how much new structure is built, and repaid only by riders who arrive decades later. That implies the comparison the op-ed omits, against options that build less, matters for carbon as much as for cost.

10 — What else the op-ed does not address

Several items that would decide whether ALTO is the right plan do not appear in the piece:

Cost. ALTO's capital estimate is $60–90 billion, an AACE Class 5 estimate in 2024 dollars (Canada's Moment).

The benefit-cost ratio. Canada's Moment declines to publish one, on the grounds that the cost estimate is too immature (p. 62). The business case has not been released.

The fare. No fare level or average yield is disclosed, though ridership, benefits and cost recovery all depend on it.

The alternative. The piece compares ALTO with VIA as it runs today, not with an upgraded or dedicated-track option. On a like-for-like basis, the Initiative's HPR Research Report (Chapter 3) sets ALTO's published midpoint at about $142 million per kilometre against about $54 million per kilometre for the HPR passenger spine. The Initiative's brief The Option Nobody Priced examines how the existing-corridor option has been assessed.

11 — Conclusion

The op-ed makes a sincere and well-informed case for passenger rail, and its goal is the right one. Read closely, its evidence supports frequent trains, reliable running on track that freight does not control, and service restored to the level ridership has historically responded to. Those are the gains its own author says high-frequency and high-speed rail share. On the Initiative's carbon arithmetic, the speed increment adds little for the climate either. **The case it does not make is the one for the speed increment**: what the additional cost buys, measured against an option built to deliver the gains both share. On the arithmetic set out here, that comparison is the one the public record still lacks.

Status of the figures

Published figures in this brief are quoted from the named sources and can be checked there. All other figures are Initiative calculations from those inputs, and are identified as such where they appear. Where ALTO has not published something, the text says so rather than inferring it. This brief makes no claim about why any figure was or was not published, and no statement about the motives or conduct of any person or organisation.

Sources & notes

Guilbeault, S., "From activist to federal minister, I've hoped for high-speed rail for most of my life. This is why the Alto plan is the right one for Canada," Toronto Star, 22 Nov 2026. ALTO, Canada's Moment: The Economic Opportunity of High-Speed Rail (Aug

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