

A Practical Alternative to Alto: Executive Summary

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Fixing and expanding VIA Rail on the rail lines we already have would double service between Québec City and Toronto for about **\$5.5 billion**, years sooner and with almost no new farmland taken, compared with **\$75–113 billion** for Alto.

The problem today

- **VIA trains are late two times out of three.** Corridor on-time performance fell to 35% in 2025, from 84% in 2011. Ridership is stuck at 4.4 million trips a year.
- **VIA owns about 3% of the track it uses.** Most belongs to CN, and Canadian law gives passenger trains no priority over freight. VIA's access contract expired in 2018 and has been extended eight times.
- **A dispute over crossing signals made it worse.** Since October 2024, CN has slowed VIA's new trains at level crossings, citing concerns that the lighter trains are not reliably detected. VIA is challenging this in court.
- **Alto is the government's answer:** a new high-speed line on a new 1,000 km corridor. The Parliamentary Budget Officer estimates \$75–113 billion. Montréal–Ottawa would open around 2036–38 and the full line around 2041–44, with expropriation of farmland along the route.

The plan in five steps

1. **Settle the crossing dispute (~\$1.0B with contingency).** Fit VIA's trains with shunt enhancers, as Amtrak agreed to do in its 2025 deal with CN, and upgrade detection at about 600 crossings, so trains can run at full speed again.
2. **Sign an on-time agreement with CN (~\$25–35M a year).** CN is paid bonuses for on-time passenger trains and penalised for delays it causes, the model that took California's Capitol Corridor to 93–95% on-time.
3. **Build passing track on existing rail lines (~\$3.05B with a 50% contingency).** 21 new sidings and passing sections, 14 extended sidings and 10 miles of double track, about 107 track-miles in total, sized for CN's longest freight trains so CN gains capacity too. Only about 130 acres of land are needed, mostly narrow strips beside existing track.

4. **Double the service (≈\$1.3B).** From about 50 to 88 trains a day, close to hourly between the main cities, with 12 new trainsets and every train lengthened to 7 cars.

5. **Add dispatch capacity (≈\$170M).** More dispatcher desks, planning software and a live CN-VIA data link, so the extra trains move without conflict.

Total: ≈\$5.5 billion, in two stages. Stage 1 (≈\$1.9B, 2027–29) restores reliability. Stage 2 (≈\$3.6B, 2030–33) is released only once on-time performance holds above 85% for a year.

VIA plan vs Alto at a glance

Alto figures use the Parliamentary Budget Officer's costs and realistic ridership (about 10 million trips a year), not Alto's own forecast of 24 million.

	VIA upgrade	Alto
Construction cost	≈\$5.5 billion	\$75–113 billion (PBO)
First improvements	2027–29	Montréal–Ottawa ≈2036–38
Full service	≈2033	≈2041–44
New land needed	≈130 acres, beside existing track	A new ≈1,000 km corridor
Towns served	Every current VIA stop	A few stations
Montréal–Toronto travel time	≈4h30–5h, reliably on time	≈3h
Public benefit per dollar spent	≈86 cents (up to \$1.60)	≈14 cents
Net federal cost per added trip	≈\$98	≈\$1,100
Construction jobs	≈6,300 a year for 7 years	≈50,000 a year for 15 years
Visitor spending in towns on the line	≈\$95M a year by 2040	Mostly at a few stations, from ≈2055

The public benefit figure is a standard 60-year cost-benefit measure: time saved, reliability, fares, and fewer cars on the road and planes in the air, against everything spent. Per dollar, both projects create the same number of construction jobs; Alto creates more because it spends 17 times as much.

Why every party should sign on

- **CN** gains publicly funded freight capacity, safer crossings, payment for on-time performance and a stable 15–20 year contract.
- **VIA** gets its trains back up to speed, room to grow and a reliable schedule to sell.
- **The federal government** gets results within three years for about one-seventeenth of Alto's cost, with the money released in stages only as performance is proven.
- **Travellers** get trains roughly every hour that leave and arrive on time.
- **Towns along the line**, from Cobourg, Belleville, Kingston and Brockville to Cornwall, Alexandria, Casselman and Drummondville, keep their stations and gain visitors, commuters and new residents, without a new rail corridor cutting through farms.

Honest limits

- No passenger railway sharing freight track has become profitable, and this plan won't either. It cuts the subsidy per trip from about \$85 to about \$54 and roughly doubles ridership over ten years, in line with the best results elsewhere.
- It does not deliver a 3-hour Montréal–Toronto trip.
- It depends on a negotiated agreement with CN.
- All figures are planning-level estimates from public data and should be verified by CN, VIA, Transport Canada and the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

The full 36-page plan, with the siding analysis, cost tables, sources and the return-on-investment comparison, is available on request.

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