Comments to ALTO February 2026

Converted to PDF from original format: .DOCX

From: Jack Heath February 19, 2026

416-464-5517 jackheath@rogers.com revised

To: ALTO

COMMENTS ON THE ALTO PROPOSAL

I was excited to attend the ALTO public consultation at Markham City Hall on February 11th. As I entered, I met people leaving the first session; they were pleased with how it went and the information received. The phrase, “It’s early days, but a great start” was used.

My thanks to Ray McIlroy of Earnscliffe Strategies for guiding me around the exhibits. I had my times wrong and could not stay for the 5pm session but he answered my questions and was the recipient of my enthusiasm. The Quebec-Montreal-Toronto-Windsor corridor has been waiting for high-speed rail (HSR) for years. I agree with your decision to take the line through Ottawa, and to complete it in phases. Get the first section, Montreal to Ottawa, into operation ASAP and start ironing out any kinks. Although not announced, it will surely go to Windsor with a branch to Niagara Falls eventually! The BC Lower Mainland and Alberta’s Calgary-Edmonton corridor must be on the radar as well. I was present when my friend, the Hon. David Collenette, Minister of Transport, ventured into the field in the 2000s. The times are now right for Canada to go forward.

TABLE OF CONTENTS Page

My Background 1

Assumptions 2

Stations in Ontario 3

The Highway 7 Widening Provincial E.A., and Should There Be a Suburban GTA Station?

4

What’s the Route from Peterborough to Union Station in Toronto? 6

ALTO and RNUP 7

ALTO, VIA and GO – Time for a Rapprochement 8

Conclusion 9

MY BACKGROUND

I served as a Markham Councillor for 25 years - the first six, 1997-2003, as the local councillor for the city's east end. My ward was fully within your corridor for the possible ALTO route. I then was elected as a city-wide regional councillor to York Region Council which included an 11-year stint as Markham Deputy Mayor. Issues of interest? In no order, municipal finance, traffic and transit, the environment including Rouge National Urban Park (RNUP), district energy, and housing. Your challenges are enormous but mostly relate to matters with which I have some experience.

I have travelled HSR in two places. In France and China. My astonishment at seeing my train's internal display board just outside Shanghai reading "275 km / hour" remains vivid in my mind; I was in such a rush to catch the train that I hadn't realized that I was on a bullet!

ASSUMPTIONS

Although I couldn't attend a session, reading the excellent materials and listening to some of the attendees leads me to make the following assumptions.

ALTO will run on its own tracks - to eliminate scheduling interference with other rail services, which is one of the major complaints about VIA. The HSR line will be double-tracked with anticipated service of 10 to 15 trains a day in each direction – some days lighter and some busier!

As an aside, I hope you plan for a Hockey Night in Canada tradition which is easily visible on CBC / Radio Canada TV when Ottawa, Montreal or Toronto play each other. Huge crowds from the visiting city in the stands. Lots of fun. Travel there and back on the same day. ALTO would encourage it. I believe we will someday have once again an NHL team in Quebec City and another one in the east GTA. Isn't all this delicious to contemplate? To a lesser extent it exists for the CFL too. These are two of my favourite sports and I have participated in the football version.

I also assume that the trains will be powered electrically. Much less pollution although I worry about costs - Ontario's nuclear can be expensive. A plus is that electric trains have much faster acceleration departing stations as compared to diesel. Few stops, no delays, quick stops and rapid acceleration will be key to reaching the average speeds required to meet the travel times on the different sections shown in your green brochure, "ALTO High Speed Train." 175 to 225 km / hour. I understand that the train would max at about 300 km / hour.

I failed to confirm, and didn't see it in the printed materials, that Union Station in downtown Toronto is the final stop at the west end of the corridor. There's a short extension on the map to about the CNE grounds; is that for overnight storage and cleaning? Union would facilitate transfers to GO or the TTC subway; if it's not the final destination, or at least a destination, you are making a huge mistake. How you will crowd ALTO tracks into Union Station is another matter!

As an aside, where are the maintenance yards to be located?

Finally, ALTO looks to be targeting long-range commuters. Those in a hurry, including MPs, MNAs and MPPs. How many flights do Air Canada and Porter have between these cities today? And what's the percentage who would save significant time by switching? Are HSRs profitable or break-even elsewhere? What is your financial target? I am sure you have a business plan with all the numbers.

STATIONS IN ONTARIO

A few observations:

Disproportionality. In the designated corridor and nearby, there are more proposed stations in Quebec per 1,000,000 people and 100 kilometres than in Ontario. There's good rationale for the 4 Quebec stations. They will serve:

the downtown of Montreal,

the major international airport in Laval which, being suburban Montreal, will also serve commuters travelling into Canada's second biggest city,

a growing smaller city along the St. Lawrence half-way to Quebec, and

the dynamic provincial capital.

In Ontario? For a greater population and longer distance, there are only 3 proposed stations. They will serve:

the downtown of Toronto, Canada's biggest urban complex, and Pearson, the country's largest international airport in the GTA's western suburbia (via UP),

a growing smaller city on the way to Ottawa, plus

the nation's capital, a million+ city in its own right.

Unlike Montreal, there's no station for travellers living in suburbia wanting to go longer distances and for commuters travelling downtown daily (I observed in Shanghai that commuters are huge users of HSR).

Nor are there stations serving the burgeoning populations along the Lake Ontario shoreline.

Recommendation. Ontario needs three more stations – in east Markham or west Pickering, Belleville and Kingston. Maybe a fourth between Oshawa and Bowmanville? If Napanee could serve both Belleville and Kingston, the number would come down. That's what environmental assessments are for - to explore issues and develop answers. My experience with the extension of the TTC Yonge Subway from Finch to Markham, Vaughan and Richmond Hill tells me that station construction costs are significantly higher than those between stations. So, if Ontario's southern corridor is where the customers are and more stations are necessary, then reduced station costs have to be one answer. My feeling? It will be the speed and comfort of the trains that will count, not the beauty of the stations. Maintaining necessary speed averages is more important.

ALTO is in a no-win game here. It's the transportation planners and engineers who have recommended 3 Ontario stations vs. elected officials at all levels - from MPs to city councils who want more stops. I've seen this before and the result is predictable. I would say to you to quickly cut it off with, "We hear you and we'll get back in X months to recommend how we can fit in more stations east of Toronto and along the Lake Ontario shoreline." ALTO doesn't want to be listening to this matter for the next half decade.

The Northern Corridor Will Be Expensive To Build. This refers to the proposed northern corridor connecting Ottawa and Peterborough. Acquisition of land, as compared to the southern corridor, should be cheaper but construction through the Canadian Shield will be more difficult and expensive. Do we need to be reminded of similar projects in our huge country - building the CPR through the Rockies and Highway 17 north of Superior?

Recommendation. Drop consideration of the northern route. There is really only one option that works, the one closer to Lake Ontario. This doesn't mean new stations have to be downtown in these communities. Cities, big and small, will cost money and time. Ten to twenty kilometres to the north next to a provincial highway would satisfy the need 99%! One that still can be served by local transit.

The Peterborough Station. One wonders why its location appears to be in the same place as the old station. Many passengers will access ALTO by car. Why not, as stated above, "ten to twenty kilometres to the [south] next to a provincial highway would satisfy the need 99%! One that still can be served by local transit."

The VIA route east of Toronto. There's nowhere else to raise this matter. I trust VIA and the cities it serves from Toronto to Montreal will not be negatively affected by the coming of ALTO. Going east, the stations are Toronto Union, Guildwood (east Toronto), Oshawa, Cobourg, Belleville, Kingston, Brockville, Cornwall, Dorval and Montreal. I've done it many times. Depending on your answers to points in STATIONS IN ONTARIO, anxieties could explode or be assuaged. This needs to be addressed soon and often.

THE HIGHWAY 7 WIDENING PROVINCIAL E.A.

and

SHOULD THERE BE A SUBURBAN GTA STATION?

Two titles combined. Let me explain. In fall 2025, the Ontario government commenced an Environment Assessment to widen the section of Hwy 7 between Reesor Road in east Markham and Brock Road in central Pickering. To four lanes to match its capacity both east and west of there. I support it. Purpose? To handle growing commuter traffic from Durham and east.

I made a submission in late 2025 to the EA and recommended a bypass just to the north of the historic hamlets of Locust Hill and Green River. It would respect the heritage of rural Markham and Pickering; there are numerous examples of new bypasses when provincial highways and municipal roads need to be widened. It would also facilitate Markham's plans for a gateway to RNUP focused on the intersection of Hwy 7 and Reesor Road, and on Locust Hill.

The bypass, if the EA recommends it and the province agrees, would intersect the CPKC Havelock Rail Line just to the north of Locust Hill and west of York-Durham Line. Likely as an overpass. It's the perfect location for ALTO's east GTA station. It would be accessed by the new 4-lane Hwy 7 and the nearby 407

toll highway, and it would connect to the 401 relatively easily. With lots of parking, an overpass paid for by the province and, likely, minimal land costs. The most easterly stop of York Region Transit's Highway 7 route is, at present, about 3 kilometres away.

There is a synergy between the two projects if the ALTO alignment follows some of the existing CPKC Havelock Line from Markham into Toronto.

For details, I have attached my submission to the provincial EA team and will send these ALTO comments to them. Hopefully the two EA teams can work together!

"Should there be a suburban GTA station in east Markham?" The answer is not "because Montreal is getting one in Laval." The answer is that one is as needed as it is in Quebec. It would be 100% more convenient for people trying to access ALTO who live in the eastern and northern portion of suburban GTA. That's over 1 million people. Plus, the 600,000+ residents of the eastern portion of the City of Toronto that is Scarborough. Almost none of them want to travel downtown, a backwards direction, in order to catch ALTO to Ottawa and Montreal. Traffic is a leading issue in the GTA, and having to travel first by car or transit into heavier traffic areas will discourage greater HSR usage.

There's a second related question. "Should the former Pickering Airport be the location of the east GTA station?" The same CPKC Havelock Line continues north-east from Locust Hill and enters the airport lands; it then arcs eastward towards Peterborough. My recommendation is, no. These lands are too far away from urban GTA and, even if the site is developed into housing and business concerns, little would happen for a few decades. This location would not be convenient for potential travellers – out in the middle of nowhere! Locating ALTO here would be encouraging even more urban sprawl - the last thing the GTA needs when trying to reign-in its traffic problems. At present, there is little urban infrastructure in place to support developing the former airport lands, and municipalities would be required to build expensive roads and other services without the business development which would have come with an airport. Ottawa made the right move in cancelling Pickering; resurrecting it in another form is not the answer. The eastern GTA's number one environmental asset is RNUP; the Pickering Airport lands should be added to the park and kept in much-needed agriculture production.

WHAT'S THE ROUTE FROM PETERBOROUGH TO UNION STATION IN TORONTO?

From Peterborough to the entry point for the GTA, east Markham or central Pickering, ALTO will operate in its own right-of-way. Double tracked. The route would parallel the Havelock Line which connects the same points. Interesting, there may be significant savings if an arrangement can be made for CPKC's

right-of-way, but the track would need replacing and the alignment modernizing anyway. It's not as if this CPKC line is busy; I was told by CP that its usual traffic is three trains a week. Living nearby, it would surprise me if even that number is reached most weeks.

But from there to downtown Toronto?

The Havelock route into Toronto is an excellent corridor. It's one of the few available in a jam-packed transportation network that is the inner GTA. But even further in, it seems to lose its way, yet it can connect to Union Station. The main CPKC line crosses the city north of Bloor Street but there are points where a connection can be made to go further south. On a personal note, I've never seen a train moving at 275 km / hour or even half that in the GTA. The waterfront line which is used for most freight (CN) and passenger services (GO Rail and VIA) would be the best place to achieve speed. But no cigar – too many trains and too many lines; safety would be compromised.

The only way I can see such speeds south-west of Markham is on an elevated platform. Surely not buried! Toronto has experience with the length of time such projects take to construct; no one wants a repeat. Even now, with Eglinton Crosstown LRT and Finch LRT finally finished, the Ontario Line is disrupting the downtown core. I can't see where an elevated platform could be sited and then interface with Union. Some of the transportation corridors have other issues, such as the Stouffville GO line through the Don River Valley with its occasional flooding. Expect route opposition when the details are announced. And skepticism about cost controls and timelines. Given the estimate of $80 to $120 billion to finish the ALTO project and approximately 2043 as the final completion date, the sceptics will have lots to talk about.

To get Ontario into operation, perhaps the answer is to introduce another phase for construction and opening – a fourth that would cover the most difficult section to build. Construction for the final three would be initiated together but the openings staggered. Not that different from the staging of the 407 as it was constructed across the top of Toronto two decades ago. For a period of time, ALTO's most westerly station would then be east Markham or central Pickering. The phases?

Montreal to Ottawa,

Quebec to Montreal,

Ottawa to the eastern GTA station, and

The eastern GTA station to Union.

ALTO AND RNUP

Any route between Peterborough and Union Station must pass through Rouge National Urban Park. The adjective “linear” is not a correct descriptive but it is close to that when applied to this great addition to our national park system. RNUP stretches north from Lake Ontario through the eastern GTA – Toronto (Scarborough). Pickering, Markham and Uxbridge. No new railway between Montreal and Toronto could avoid passing through it. However, RNUP was not meant to be a barrier to needed infrastructure for the large urban complex that is the GTA.

The Rouge National Urban Park Act is federal legislation which was introduced and given Royal Assent in 2015. There have been amendments but not to section 16:

“Authority to dispose

16(1) Public lands or a right or interest in public lands in the Park may be disposed of to a federal or provincial authority, including the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, or to a municipal authority, if the disposal is required for the purposes of the installation or maintenance of public infrastructure, including public utilities or transportation corridors.

16(2) Subsection (1) ceases to apply in respect of the transfer of the fee simple in the public lands when the total amount of lands in which fee simple has been transferred under that subsection reaches an area of 200 hectares.”

What does it mean? It says that if a public authority, from another branch of the federal government (read ALTO for a railway and possibly a station) and the provincial government (read the Ministry of Transportation for a Hwy 7 bypass of Locust Hill and Green River), to the Region of York or the City of Markham, needs to access RNUP lands to maintain a sewer already in place, which is York’s need every decade or two, build a new railway, or widen a road, there’s a process for it to do so.

But there’s a limit. The total of all these land transfers or permissions cannot exceed 200 hectares.

The easiest way to explain the importance of this, and the challenge for both the ALTO project team and Parks Canada staff running Rouge National Urban Park, is to lift a section from my late 2025 submission to HDR Consulting on the provincial Highway 7 widening:

“I am sure that HDR and MTO are aware of the Landholder’s Agreement (LA) which was signed by Parks Canada, the province, Toronto, York, Markham, Pickering, Durham and others a decade ago [a year or two before the RNUP Act]. All the parties were pleased that a National Park was coming but, at the same time, wanted to ensure that it would not lead to issues with important urban infrastructure in and around

RNUP in existence now or coming in the future for servicing or necessary expansion. Such as sewers, hydro lines, and roads. The GTA is Canada's biggest urban centre and there was no desire for the park to be a barrier.

The federal RNUP Act and the LA have a formula to permit a small amount of land to be taken out of the park in cases of needed infrastructure such as the widening of Highway #7. There's a maximum for the total. A Hwy #7 detour or bypass would need land from the park but would surely qualify under the criteria. My interpretation is that Parks Canada has the final say but, because of the maximum which impacts all parties not only the applicant, the others would also need to acquiesce. This project will be the first large application of the formula. I should add that I have never heard of a cost being attached to needed land transfers."

It should have said, "This project, and ALTO, will be the first major applications of the formula." What is important to note is that there have not been previous discussions as to how one determines the exact number of hectares being removed from the park for a specific project. I expect Parks Canada to be a tough negotiator on this. Rightly so. It will be politically sensitive too. But, for ALTO, if the route in east Markham follows the Havelock Line, then that land is already outside the park. Can a second track fit in? Proper remediation, and naturalization too, for work yards after construction finishes would see the land return to the park; it shouldn't count. Similarly, with a station at the rail crossing, some of the needed land may have already been removed for the Hwy 7 widening project. It shouldn't count twice!

One of the reasons discussions will need to take place is referenced in the quote. All levels of government must fit under the 200 hectare cap. For example, Hydro One, which may someday need another major transmission line in or near the park, will want to ensure the 200 hectare capacity is not closed-off by the Ontario Ministry of Transportation!

One other aspect may apply. An ALTO station in RNUP will permit park visitors to take rapid transit into the park. A huge benefit. How does this fit into the formula? That there could be benefits to the park with new infrastructure and how they might be calculated is not in the LA.

ALTO may benefit in another way. If Ottawa transfers the airport lands to RNUP at the same time as Parks Canada deals with ALTO's infrastructure request, a win-win for all parties is possible.

ALTO, VIA AND GO – TIME FOR A RAPPROCHMENT

Shorter-range commuter rail services into the GTA have been provided by GO Rail for as long as I can remember. Longer-range, say from Chatham or Kingston, has been with VIA forever as well. ALTO will

join this group.

Yet times are changing. Integration is happening across the GTA of municipal transit services, at least their fares, routes and transfer systems although not their management. It's a change in which I had a small part. GO Bus and Rail are involved too.

All public transportation services, from federal to municipal, have a role to play in finding solutions to the traffic issues bedeviling Canada's largest cities. Montreal and Toronto included. Silos need to continue coming down to provide better service and greater affordability. I am not conversant with Montreal, but the GTA is another matter.

ALTO should have an integrated role in the commuting challenge that is the GTA. Even now, VIA should start the process and, in effect, pave the way for ALTO. Especially in cooperation and coordination with GO Rail. One fare with free transfers across the GTA has become the norm among transit systems and most fare zones such as the one at Steeles Avenue between the TTC and YRT have been eliminated. GO does allow transfers, but it is still fare-by-distance.

My expectation is that all transit service providers should be one fare, whatever distance, within a prescribed boundary for the GTA. And commuters should be able to access whatever service is best for them. That fare should compare very favourably with owning and commuting by car. Outside the entry point for the GTA, fare by distance would apply to ALTO, VIA, GO and Ontario Northland too. Much more work needs to be done, and the federal and provincial governments should be at the table to a much greater extent than they are today. Increased subsidies are on the menu.

The result would be ALTO and VIA serving daily commuters much more than now. Unfortunately, most of Canada's version of the commuters I saw in Shanghai are missing from ALTO.

The reason residents along the eastern Lake Ontario waterfront in Belleville and Kingston want service from ALTO is that VIA is not as dependable as it should be, and GO Rail only goes as far as Oshawa. If the ALTO equation includes improvements to the VIA line and service, with elimination of delays for freight trains as a priority, so much the better. If you want to reduce the pressure for stations in eastern Ontario, make VIA delay proof as much as possible and extend GO rail further east. Discussions with VIA and GO should be part of the ALTO project and public awareness of such is essential.

I am aware of informal groups and meetings, but ALTO might even call for the formal establishment of a GTA Transit Committee with a strong list of responsibilities; it would include all the systems operating in

the GTA including GO, VIA, and ALTO.

CONCLUSION

There you have my initial thoughts on the ALTO project. As you can see, it really excites me. Such an opportunity. If I can be of assistance, I'd like that. My contact information is on page one. Good luck in your endeavours. Jack Heath