



Thoughts on the opening of the Shin-Aomori service

What Is Required for Regional Revitalization?

Today, when regional sovereignty is often mentioned and when we are deemed to be in the age of the local region, the revitalization of local communities has become an important element in improving the affluence of society. With the impending opening of the Shin-Aomori Shinkansen extension on December 4th this year, on May 19th in the Aomori Prefectural Building we held an opinion exchange session regarding the roles to be taken by both JR East and local communities. Those attending the meeting included Governor Shingo Mimura of Aomori Prefecture and Ms. Yasuko Shima of an Aomori area development group, who both regard the service extension as a great opportunity, and Professor Shigeru Hori of the University of Tokyo, whose specialties include landscape design and engineering, and community planning.

<p>[Participants]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. Shingo Mimura (Governor of Aomori Prefecture) • Mr. Shigeru Hori (Professor, Asian Natural Environmental Science Center, University of Tokyo) • Ms. Yasuko Shima (Aozora-gumi, Oma Town Revitalization Group) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. Toshiro Ichinose (Director and General Manager, Management Planning Department, East Japan Railway Company) • Mr. Mitsuhiro Akasaka (Aomori Stationmaster, East Japan Railway Company) <p>[Facilitator]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. Mitsuo Ogawa (CEO, Craig Consulting)
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An Age of Self-sustainable Local Communities

ICHINOSE

Since its establishment, JR East has had the mission of advancing its business activities while contributing to local societies based on its railway network. When we look at eastern Japan today, however, we can see that there are, unfortunately, certain areas that appear to be losing their vitality.

In our 2020 Vision we committed ourselves to the active advancement of local revitalization, so during our discussions today, we would like all of you to voice your opinions, based as they no doubt are on your respective standpoints.

OGAWA

Today we will discuss the theme “Thoughts on the opening of the Shin-Aomori service: What Is Required for Regional Revitalization?” First, however, I would like to hear your thoughts on the issue of the necessity of regional revitalization.

MIMURA

I believe the commencement of the Shinkansen service to Shin-Aomori is a once-in-a-century chance for Aomori Prefecture. All four routes (air, road, sea, and rail) will be established, thereby turning Aomori into mainland Japan’s greatest transportation node. Travel times between Aomori and the Tokyo metropolitan area will be dramatically reduced, bringing, I hope, a significant increase in the exchange of people, goods, and information between the two areas.

Initially, economic revitalization through tourism and the attraction of new companies will be our primary aim, but we also hope to increase the potential for cultural and civilization-based exchanges. What will be vital is how each citizen of the prefecture personally uses this opportunity and how each citizen makes the most of this new age.



Mr. Toshiro Ichinose
Director and General Manager, Management Planning Department, East Japan Railway Company

Aomori Prefecture is striving to further increase the benefits that will be brought by the opening of the service through the efforts of 67 organizations and seven councils led by the Council for Strategic Utilization of the Completed Shinkansen Line. Furthermore, next year a Destination Campaign¹ will be implemented in Aomori Prefecture, so at the moment we are busily identifying attractions, some of which have not previously had very high visibility. I feel that the opening of the Shinkansen service has already had an impact in many fields, having, for example, brought about a forward-looking air that is recognizable throughout the entire prefecture.



Mr. Shingo Mimura
Governor of Aomori Prefecture

HORI

The reason why regional revitalization is being talked about so much these days is because we are now in an age when local regions have to become self-sustaining. Some local areas, however, are not yet prepared to be so, and the majority of the people simply expect the government to take care of things, or only expect to participate in something if it sounds interesting to them on a personal basis. It is my hope that the people of Aomori take the opening of the Shin-Aomori Shinkansen service as an opportunity to think for themselves.



Mr. Shigeru Hori
Professor, Asian Natural Environmental Science Center, University of Tokyo

The question remains, however, about what should be done to enable regions to be self-sustaining. In my opinion, the first need is for local areas to have their own, unique products. Products, however, do not sell themselves, so it is necessary to make them appealing to potential customers and publicize them widely. These three points of: ① having products; ② adding appeal to them; and ③ publicizing them widely are all vital if local communities are to become self-sustaining.

SHIMA

Governor Mimura mentioned that the opening of the Shinkansen service is a “once-in-a-century chance,” so isn’t it vital for us to increase the number of people who have a desire to do things and a knowledge of when to do them — now! What we need is action. Furthermore, although the start of Shinkansen service will bring the region closer to other regions, we must not allow this fact to dilute our appeal; rather we should make it an opportunity to strengthen that appeal. The main questions are, however, how far can we pursue Aomori’s uniqueness and its differences from neighboring regions and urban areas, and how can we make that enhanced Aomori uniqueness into a form that can be marketed nationwide? We are still struggling in these areas.



Ms. Yasuko Shima
Aozora-gumi,
Oma Town Revitalization Group

MIMURA

Last year the centennial of the author Osamu Dazai, a former resident of Kanegi-mura, Kitatsugaru-gun, now Goshogawara City, was celebrated. To honor the writer, we organized various tourist activities and instigated what local citizens came up with—a Field Museum—by which, instead of simply constructing something, we turned the entire city into a Dazai museum by taking people to, for example, the place where Dazai often ate his boxed lunch, and another where he liked to drink sake. This approach proved extremely popular with tourists and is a clear example of a success in turning an area into a product with added appeal, which again has made people aware of the fact that they can achieve things if they use their ingenuity. At this time, it is important that we create our own content and add some value to it to make something fresh and interesting. I feel sure that Aomori people are willing, so the question is how to actually turn ideas into results.

SHIMA

I am currently working on the preparation of 1,000 overnight-stay-type tourist attractions within Aomori Prefecture, but I am constantly aware that forced, unnatural programs almost always fail. Although I myself started my activities simply because I found them interesting, I am now in a stage of evaluating whether or not my work can become firmly rooted in the tourism industry. With the coming opening of the Shin-Aomori Shinkansen service, an awareness has been building up that we must no-longer compete on a small and individual basis, but must cooperate as a single Aomori Prefecture. In fact, by having

everyone contribute something good from their individual communities and pooling our resources, we can ultimately make something with an even greater appeal.

HORI In the past when commercializing local products, there have been many cases where most of the work has been shouldered by volunteers. When this happens, it is obvious that production cannot last for a long time. Instead of relying purely on volunteers, therefore, when we produce something it is extremely important to approach the project from a viewpoint of cost consciousness. We need to logically determine whether each product can become firmly rooted in society and turn into a source of bread and butter for local residents. This is the role of local governments and residents, and, at the same time, something that should be considered by third parties such as JR East.

Perspective of Hospitality Development

OGAWA You mean that the motivation to refine things that already exist is increasing. I think this is also connected with the Hospitality Development that Professor Hori has been advocating.

HORI What actually is attraction? People within communities are often the least aware of this and often carry out regional and product development with feelings such as “we want people to come” and “we want people to buy,” but I think it is vital that we instill in the public in general a sense of “I want to go” instead. In this area, I think JR East’s know-how can be put to valuable use. JR East’s campaigns are planned to make people “want to go” rather than inviting people to come. “We want people to come to Aomori” and “We want to go to Aomori.” I think it is very important to understand the difference between these apparently similar but actually divergent approaches. The Hospitality Development I advocate is a key phrase if we are to create a hospitable society. In the latter part of the 1960s, visits to farmhouse inns became popular, but the fashion didn’t last. Why? It was simply because local communities didn’t understand what people wanted from such trips. Guests were willing to pay for what they wanted, but local people often offered them something different. Because the two sides saw things differently, it was inevitable that the boom petered out. In other words, it is important to remember that those who pay for services are in a stronger position than those who provide them. Local communities need to bear this in mind. It is often the case that things that are common and seem mundane to locals may be considered exotic and attractive to others who would be willing to pay to experience them. As a result, I think it is vital that we identify just what things that we readily accept as normal, are actually different.

MIMURA The ordinary local dishes we eat daily, for example, might be considered exotic by people visiting Aomori for the first time. In the past we haven’t always understood this and have defined “hospitality” as a demand for extravagant cuisine. We should probably change our mindset regarding this, and simply provide visitors with the things that we experience in our daily lives. This is the true meaning of “hospitality.”

AKASAKA As a station, we are also promoting the attractions of the region and regional goods in cooperation with community residents. Ms. Shima mentioned the creation of a single goal, and JR East, as a transport operator, will need to consider how to connect railway networks. I believe the role of local government is significant so I would like to proceed in cooperation with local public bodies.

ICHINOSE In reality, many local secondary transport systems have not been able to become part of the network. There will undoubtedly be excitement and enthusiasm when the service is launched, but it will not last long unless we finesse this enthusiasm into a business model. We are transport professionals, but I believe it is extremely important not just for us, but also for professionals in all fields to cooperate.


HORI Attractiveness becomes important when we form businesses and it is, therefore, vital to consider how to sustain that attractiveness. We must be aware that the attention span of the public is short. For example, if we simply make the same product over and over again,



Mr. Mitsuhiro Akasaka
Aomori Stationmaster,
East Japan Railway Company

will it remain attractive? I don't think so. We have to understand that if things never change, their appeal decreases day by day. In other words, unless JR East and other third parties provide input and advice, I don't think it will be easy for local regions to make sustainable products.

Time for Cooperation Between Local Regions and JR East

HORI	JR East has a travel product called Tabi-Ichi ² that treats local communities as products in a detailed and careful way. I think this is a very good approach. I strongly believe that JR East should continue this kind of effort and, thus, support the commercialization of local areas, with, for example, the introduction of an Aomori Tabi-Ichi.	
ICHINOSE	This kind of detailed and fine-tuned commercialization may not be very common.	
HORI	I believe Tabi-Ichi is a unique concept that attempts to commercialize local daily life rather than merely relying on traditional tourist resources such as objects of interest. All regions have the potential to turn themselves into products this way, and I evaluate this approach highly.	The Tabi-Ichi travel package brand is based on proposals from local communities
AKASAKA	JR East organizes "Hiking from station" packages. For example, there is a Doll's Festival called Kukuribina in a town called Mizusawa, and visitors from all over the country flock there to see the Kukuribina which for many years the local people had packed away out of sight. We organized a hiking course, starting from the station, that allows visitors and local residents to communicate with each other. This is just one example of many where JR East, in cooperation with local communities, is shining fresh lights on artifacts that may have been hidden from the public for generations, but which are of intrinsic interest.	
SHIMA	<p>I take pride in having been able to maintain the momentum from our initial period even though our area development guerrilla activities have now continued for a decade. This is, I believe, because we have been doing new things one after the other. The next challenge and the energy needed to face it must, of course, come from the people who are taking on the challenges, but I think they need JR East and local public bodies to support them.</p> <p>In terms of information provision, the Shinkansen service will bring us to a turning point where Aomori Prefecture will open up to the outside. I believe we have at last reached a stage where we can connect with the outside world and create something new.</p>	
MIMURA	I agree. Our spirits are being raised and our economy is picking up in various senses and I recognize this as an opportunity. By researching the many successful cases we have collected, we are exploring the possibilities of turning this opportunity into something concrete.	

Expected Roles as a Transport and Tourism Professional

HORI	What I sometimes wonder is whether or not there are forms and devices within the city that could be made sufficiently attractive to visitors even if the local people involved are only capable of exerting 70% of their energy. There are many regions that rely on events and other projects that depend on the efforts and hard work of local residents for their success, but I think this is dangerous. It is impossible for local residents to constantly give 100%. One way we can allow local people to relax a little is to build up a stock of attractions throughout a community which make visitors can feel good the moment they see them. If we can create an overall attractiveness, people won't have to work at full force all the time. These attractions don't necessarily have to be constructions; they could, for example, be flowers. In other words, combining tangible and intangible appeal is a good way for regions to become self-sustainable and allow us to create a framework that will attract tourists without residents having to dedicate all their strength to its maintenance.
MIMURA	On the opening day of Hachinohe Station, what struck me most was the first impressions of travelers as they arrived at the station. They said they were most impressed by the "hospitality at the entrance" where local people welcomed them with smiles. What

do you think is needed to give visitors the first impressions that they are being treated hospitably?

- HORI I think that what the governor just said is perfectly correct. We all know that when our first impression is one of welcome and hospitality, we feel that the place we are visiting is a good place, and we want to return there again and again. Obviously, places you have never visited seem attractive, but it is often the case that once you have been there, the attraction weakens. Sometimes, furthermore, once we get used to the spirit of hospitality that so struck us when we first arrived, a place may seem to become less hospitable. That is why, for example, forms and features in front of stations are very important.
- SHIMA Indeed. The uniqueness of Aomori, that feeling of “Ah, it’s Aomori,” I think is quite significant. Whether or not we can produce that feeling the moment visitors get off the train at a station could be critical.
- MIMURA So, as a professional body in the transport industry, I would like JR East to share its knowledge with us and demonstrate how we can take on the role of researching local attractions and turning them into tourist draws.
- HORI I also would like JR East to work on the commercialization of unearthed regional attractions and provide their know-how.
- OGAWA Thank you. Today, we have discussed what is needed for the revitalization of regional economies. What has been highlighted includes the roles of local residents, local governments, and JR in their respective roles, and the importance of hospitality and attractiveness as a product. With the opening of the service to Shin-Aomori in December 2010, I hope each of you and the entities you represent will, from your own respective standpoints, shoulder part of the burden of revitalizing Aomori Prefecture. Once again, thank you very much.



Mr. Mitsuo Ogawa
CEO, Craig Consulting



Shin-Aomori Station scheduled to open on
December 4, 2010

*1 **Destination Campaign** Large-scale tourism campaign implemented by six JR Group companies, designated local governments, local tourism operators, etc.

*2 **Tabi-Ichi** Travel packages offering a menu of experiences and tourism through which travelers can fully enjoy the delights of the seasons alongside local residents.