



CASE STUDY

Toyama | Compact City

A Return to Vitality

Cities approaching population decline and rapid ageing can look to Toyama, a pioneer in tackling these challenges, for solutions. Under its holistic compact city policy, Toyama invested in public transport, created a walkable and vibrant city, and implemented ageing policies that encourage healthy, sociable seniors.

The Challenge

When Masashi Mori was elected mayor of Toyama in 2005, he was confronted with the herculean task of managing urban sprawl and an ageing population in the coastal city located on Japan's main island of Honshu.

Young people were leaving the urban city centre for more affordable suburbs, creating the phenomenon of *akiya* (vacant homes). The city was also suffering from a shrinking population caused by persistent low birth rates and high life expectancy. If left unaddressed, 30% of its population would comprise senior citizens by 2030.

The city's car-dependent nature—Toyama had the second-highest car ownership rate in Japan in 2009—also eroded public transport services. The high reliance on cars and scattered city structure led to an overall 15.7% jump in carbon dioxide emissions between 1990 and 2005 across industry, households, business and transport divisions.

Mayor Mori and his team had to act fast to prevent the city's decline. The Compact City Strategy, unveiled in 2008, aimed to revamp Toyama's public transport system and bring life back to the city centre.



Toh Ee Ming is a freelance journalist who contributes to the South China Morning Post and the Xinhua News Agency, covering society, politics and culture.



Sprawling Toyama City was ageing and overly reliant on cars.



The Solution

Toyama's goal was to become a "city of short distances", which would be achieved by building a resilient infrastructure network to allow citizens to easily shuttle between the city centre, suburbs and rural areas.

Crucial to this strategy was the city's tram network, which opened in 2006. Under the plan, its route was extended to circulate the city centre. The project was a huge success,

with the network carrying some 4,900 passengers daily—above the projected 3,400 passengers—and reduced greenhouse gas emissions. The city's population was engaged throughout the process. Over 120 regional town meetings were held, as Mayor Mori explained the rationale of the strategy to residents to gain their support. The city also raised funds from locals and businesses to improve and maintain the tram network.

To entice citizens back to the city centre, Toyama carved out specific residential zones, providing each one with essential services like supermarkets, schools and hospitals. Public transport services to these districts were also improved to boost connectivity, with subsidies offered to those who moved into the city centre or the residential zones. In a move to beautify its trams and inner city, Mayor Mori introduced free travel on public transport to anyone carrying a bouquet of flowers. The city also partnered with French advertising giant JCDecaux to introduce a city-wide bicycle sharing system.

Toyama introduced ageing policies that encouraged senior to lead active and independent lives, while making the city more accessible and senior-friendly. With a special travel pass, seniors can travel in and out of the city via tram for 100 yen (S\$1.25), and grandparents and their grandchildren receive free entry to museums, zoos and other attractions. This led to a 13% increase in city facility use from 2011 to 2013. The city was also revitalised with more older people socialising outdoors. To encourage its seniors to walk more, Toyama launched the Let's Walk programme, where leaders take groups of seniors on long walks throughout the city and the countryside.

Toyama also has unique preventive care and advanced care facilities geared at keeping its seniors in tip-top health, to curb the costs of increased long-term nursing care and lessen the burden on future generations. For example, at Kadokawa Care Prevention Centre, the city's first fitness and rehab facility for

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seniors, seniors can engage in strength training, gymnastics, enjoy steam baths and even try water aerobics in an onsen. Meanwhile, Toyama's integrated daycare centres like Konoyubi Tomare cater to the elderly, young people and special needs individuals all in one facility, offering daycare services, short stays, job training and recreational activities. As of 2016, Toyama had 47 of such facilities.

The private sector is also trying to cater to an ageing population. Toyama's supermarkets have dedicated more spaces for adult diapers and ready-made meals that can be easily chewed, while convenience chain stores like Lawson provide comfortable seating areas, blood pressure monitors and counselling services for seniors. Malls like Aeon offer affordable food for seniors, organise special events and train staff to recognise dementia symptoms. Supermarkets have also introduced mobile services to remote neighbourhoods, giving elderly living in these areas access to household products and fresh food. Technology was also used to improve the lives of seniors, and initiatives include robot companions in retirement homes, to sensors that keep a close eye on elderly living alone.



The Outcome


Thanks to Mayor Mori's "all carrots, no sticks" approach, Toyama's long-term vision, strong partnership among city stakeholders and introduction of creative solutions, the city has successfully reversed the trend of the urban centre hollowing out and created Japan's most accessible and senior-friendly city. Between 2005 and 2017, the share of residents living in the city centre and other designated residential zones grew from 28% to 38.6%. The city aims to hit 42% by 2024, and is working on additional measures such as subsidised housing construction for those living within 500 m of tram stations.

Mayor Mori is also proud of how the city promotes strong face-to-face interaction: 99% of all residents live within a 2-km radius of a branch office of city hall, while 88% live near a social services provider—more than any other Japanese city. Toyama has managed to maintain a high quality of life despite its high density. Toyama's Grand Plaza, an open space with a large glass roof at the heart of the city's commercial district, is now a focal gathering point that hosts over 100 events annually. The city also has the highest level

of participation in senior citizen's clubs in the country—42.5%, compared to the national average of 14.4%, according to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

Its compact city efforts have garnered strong interest from other Japanese and global cities. In 2008, Toyama was designated an Environmental Model City by the Japanese government, and in 2012, it was among the first cities worldwide to be recognised by the OECD for its compact city policies.

More significantly, in 2017, Toyama was the first Japanese city to make the Rockefeller Foundation's global list of 100 Resilient Cities, alongside Barcelona, Los Angeles and Sydney.

Under Resilient Toyama, a comprehensive strategic roadmap to promote city resilience, its vision for 2050 is just as ambitious and far-sighted. Toyama continues to aim to be a vibrant city of innovation that promotes high-quality, environmentally friendly living with strong community bonds. 

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