

# The Driverless Car in Eiheiijicho - Innovation for Restoring Local Economy



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Eiheiijicho in the northeastern part of Fukui Prefecture in the Hokuriku region of Japan is one of 1,724 municipalities in the country. It is classified as a “town” and has a population of less than 20,000. Like many of its counterparts which are located far away from the mega-metropolitan areas of Japan – cities like Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Yokohama – Eiheiijicho faces the two big problems that plague regional areas of the country. These problems are a rapidly declining economy and a rapidly aging local population. “Abenomics”, launched in 2014 by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s administration as a series of economic and structural reforms, included measures to try to reduce the concentration of business – and thereby population – in the greater Tokyo metropolitan area. It was felt that such measures, in addition to lessening the geographically lopsided economics of the country, would lead to a reversal in the declining birthrate.

The basis for this opinion was that the birthrate in regional areas was higher than in Tokyo due to the cost of living parameters, like real estate and food, being much lower and a considerably more relaxed lifestyle leading to more quality time within the family. If more business opportunities could be created in regional municipalities, young people would choose to live there and given the better quality of life for raising a family, this would lead to a positive birthrate in addition to economic revitalization.

Japan SPOTLIGHT had an opportunity to visit Eiheiijicho and interview the mayor, Hisamitsu Kawai. The following article is based on notes from our meeting and illustrates how his township is tackling the twin problems, as an example of regional revitalization.

(Interviewed on April 15, 2019)

## Introduction

Japan has abundant scenery, hot-springs, cultural and religious edifices and monuments that stand testimony to its long history.

From ancient times until 1871, the region of northeastern Fukui Prefecture was known as Echizen Province. It was a prosperous area, with fertile rice fields fed by the Asuwa, Hino and Kuzuryu rivers and with a rocky coastline on which the town of Mikuni, an important trading port on the Sea of Japan, was located. Japanese classical literature has immortalized Echizen in the famous novel *The Tale of Genji* by Lady Murasaki Shikibu. The author, who was herself a courtesan, captures the bohemian lifestyle of the Heian Era (794-1185), during which period she spent a year in Echizen.

The name of the old province continues to generate nostalgia to this day. There are local crafts, food and drink which are named after it. A local railway company, the Echizen Railway, operates trains on two lines connecting the prefectural capital of Fukui city through the



Hisamitsu Kawai

rural areas of the ancient province, including Eiheiijicho.

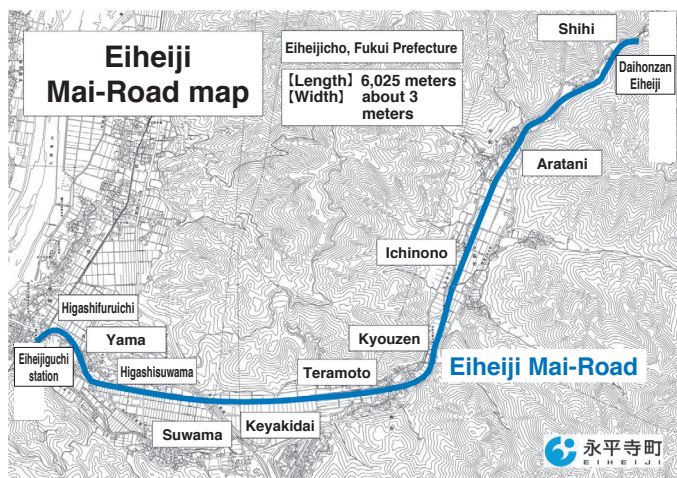
## Mayor Takes the Initiative

Hisamitsu Kawai has been the mayor of Eiheiijicho since 2014, when at the age of 41 he became one of the country’s mayors who were on the lower side of the age spectrum. Five years into his post, he continues to be driven by youthful energy and ideas to revitalize his hometown.

Mayor Kawai recognizes the fact that the township’s residents are at the core of any town-building exercise. He pursues a wholesome public policy of collaborating with

the residents to understand their real needs. He achieves an enviable excellence in engagement with them through discussions and information dissemination. The office of the township promotes open and unhesitant communication with the local populace.

His larger goals range from encouraging a healthy business environment for industries and agriculture to promoting social welfare policies that support the raising of children or assisting aged



*Eihei Mai-Road, a promenade using a discontinued railroad of the Eiheiji Line of Keifuku Electric Railroad Co., Ltd.*



*Demonstration driving tests for driverless EV commuter vehicles on Eiheiji Mai-Road*

people and ensuring efficient systems for the management of disasters. Mayor Kawai likes to think out of the box. Initiatives taken by him in order to achieve his goals have reflected this thinking. We look at some of these initiatives in the paragraphs that follow.

### The Driverless Car

In November 2017, Eiheijicho and Osaka-based Panasonic Corporation partnered to field test a driverless electric vehicle. The location for the field test was a walking trail of about 6 kilometers on what used to be a railroad around Eiheijicho. This location was selected by the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology, based on demographic and environmental factors like a rapidly aging population and heavy snow in winter.

As communities age, they face reduced mobility and in rural areas it leaves with them no option but to drive their own conventional cars. The risks involved in such an activity are enormous and are substantiated by the large number of road accidents that can be attributed to aging drivers. Driverless cars would solve this problem. In addition, being electric, they are ecologically friendly and will not disturb the pristine natural environment of the area.

The project has been actively supported by Mayor Kawai whose office took considerable pains to explain to residents about it and the benefits of such a solution when ready for commercial use. In March 2018, Mayor Kawai, along with Yasushi Ishiai from Panasonic and racing driver Keiko Ihara, attended an innovation event in Austin, Texas, where they showcased their unique project from a socio-

economic perspective. Their inputs were well received and there was a special mention of it at the annual automobile vision mobility event held in Germany that year.

### On a Path to Paperless-ness

With a view to adopting ecologically friendly methods, Mayor Kawai has shown interest in reducing the use of paper by adopting digital methods to document creation and management. There has been some collaboration with the University of Tokyo on this and effective solutions are under examination. It may take some time before a solution that is appropriate for the needs of Eiheijicho is found, but it is commendable that an initiative has been taken.

### Conclusion

Collaborative ideas like those encouraged by Mayor Kawai require the involvement of not only the municipality and its residents, but the national government also. One may say that entrepreneurship is not the sole purview of private enterprise but can even be practiced successfully by governments. The success of Mayor Kawai's initiatives may play a key role in the revitalization of the remote municipalities of Japan.

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