

THE streets of Japan have been transformed since June 1, 2006. The long chains of illegally parked vehicles that once used to line both sides of roads throughout the country have disappeared. The roads seem wider now and the infamous congestion of city centers has changed for the better. Perhaps the roads have been cleared up, but the drivers have grown frustrated.

Cars parked along the streets were once a commonplace sight throughout the country. It is said that the parking facilities currently available are only able to meet approximately half of the demand, and on top of that, the parking fees are high. Illegal parking is of course a violation of the law, but drivers had repeatedly parked illegally on the street without much sense of guilt.

This is not to say that the police had been negligent in their duties. As soon as they found a car parked illegally on a street, they would mark the tires and the road surface with chalk. Later, they would check to see whether the car had been moved, and if it had

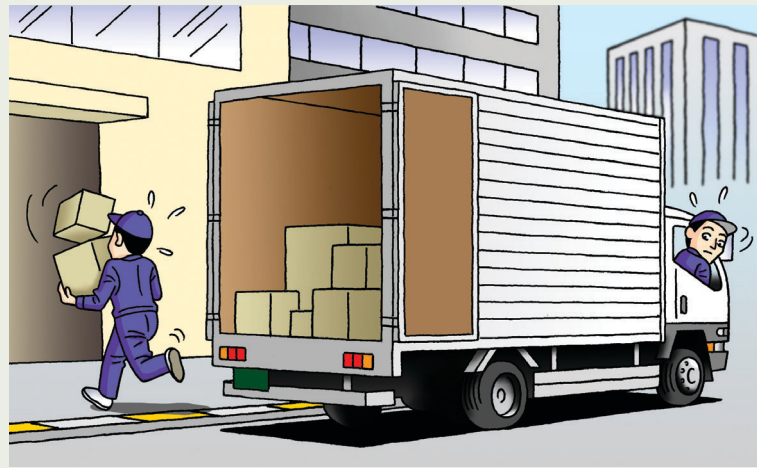


Illustration: Kato Susumu

## Clearance of Traffic Jams Obstructs Businesses

By Matsunaga Tsutomu

not, they would ticket it. They continued this method for a long period of time.

Drivers were naturally so afraid of being charged with parking illegally that an illegal device was even put on the market which could sense when a car was marked with chalk and warn the driver via a wireless signal.

At a press conference in 2003, the Director General of the National Police Agency announced a plan to outsource the enforcement of parking violations to the private sector. A major factor leading to this was the deterioration of law and order and the fact that police already had more work than they could handle.

The enforcement of violations by civilian parking inspectors began on June 1st. The chalk-mark warnings have become a thing of the past. The inspector takes a photo of the vehicle with a digital camera and places the ticket on the car. The grace period has been eliminated and the vehicle is ticketed straight away.

Immediately after the implementation of the new law, congestion times in the major metropolitan areas, including Tokyo and Osaka, shrank rapidly. The distribution sector has achieved rapid growth in Japan, but it is facing a dilemma. It includes parcel delivery services, which park their vehicles on the streets for a short time to deliver packages to customers' homes quickly and at low cost. However, this new system presents such firms with an adverse headwind. The cost of their services will increase if they hire an assistant for each vehicle so that the driver can leave the truck on the street. Elsewhere, taxi drivers find that they are not even able to leave their cabs to use the toilet.

In the provincial cities, customers are being taken away by the large-scale stores with large parking lots in the suburbs, and many of

the shopping areas in the central cities are being transformed into "shuttered streets," along which shop owners have lowered their shutters permanently due to lack of business. Those businesses which were barely operating anyway are finding it virtually impossible to continue functioning as a result of the introduction of the new system.

With the new era of parking violation enforcement, parking lot operators, to the contrary, are on a roll. Any patch of idle land within the urban centers has been transformed at least temporarily into parking lots.

When one major map publisher came out with a "Handy Parking Guide," its stock price leaped up. In addition to showing the usual location of parking lots and their rates, the guide included a special bar code that can be read by the cameras built into cell phones. By clicking on this code, one can access a site that will tell him/her in real time exactly which nearby lots are filled and which have space available.

Major communications firms are adding to their for-fee route guidance systems via cell phones a new service which shows those areas where parking violation enforcement is particularly strict. They have also stepped up the search functions for locating parking facilities near destinations.

Friction has arisen between the public and private sectors regarding the application of the new system. Among the criticisms raised is that the new juridical bodies to which the enforcement is being entrusted appear to be primarily places for the reemployment of retired police officers. Another criticism is that parcel delivery functions of the postal service are exempted under the current law.

In order to ensure that the effective management of the system is as tidy as the scene in the streets, an evenhanded functional method of carrying it out is required.

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