

Easy, casual and convenient for everyone!

Japan's First Private Car Public Transportation Service 'Noccal Asahimachi'

Asahi Town, Toyama Prefecture



Background

In recent years, Asahi Town in Toyama Prefecture has been experiencing serious ageing and population decline issues, with mobility needs increasing, particularly among the elderly who cannot drive their own cars. After the withdrawal of private bus routes, the municipal government has been operating community buses and has continued to improve its services as a public transportation system that supports the residents' transportation needs since 2014. However, taking into consideration the ageing of drivers, staff shortages, usage needs and the maintenance of operating costs, it was difficult to increase the number of buses or extend operating hours any further. Furthermore, there was only one taxi company in the town, so it came to a point where the municipal government had to consider policies to maintain transportation infrastructure over a medium- to long-term period. As the timing also coincided with a proposal from private company HAKUHODO Inc. regarding local transportation services, Asahi Town decided to work with them to restructure the local transportation system as a public and private sector venture.

After a trial run, full-scale operations of the public transportation service 'Noccal Asahimachi' began in October 2021.

Objectives

1. Creating a town that is easy for everyone to get around in

2. Creating sustainable public transportation services
3. Revitalising a culture of mutual assistance in local communities

Project Outline

Noccal Asahimachi is a new public transportation service that puts the spirit of mutual assistance into practice, with local residents as drivers, using their own cars to give passengers a ride on their way when they go out. Asahi Town serves as the main operator, while operation management such as reservations and making remote roll calls is outsourced to Kokuto Jidosha Shokai Ltd., the only taxi company in the town. The drivers are ordinary local residents, who use their own cars to operate the service. This is a new transportation service, achieved through cooperation between the local government, a transport company and local residents. In August 2020, a trial service for this, Japan's first collaborative private and paid passenger transportation service.

The user selects a ride from the dates, times and bus stop locations available, and can only make a reservation by phone or LINE up to the day before. The driver then checks the reservation status on the app and acts according to the reservations. The taxi company, which acts as the operation manager, ensures the safety of the service by making remote roll calls to the drivers before and after each trip.

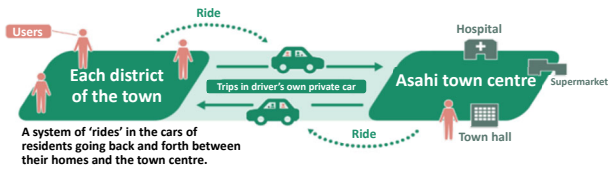


Diagram: Noccacal Asahimachi's operation system



Photos: Images of Noccacal Asahimachi in operation

Features and Innovations

1. Cooperation and coexistence with existing public transportation and transportation operators

Noccacal Asahimachi operates on a timetable that fills in the gaps in the community bus schedule and is based on getting on and off at bus stops rather than a door-to-door operation. By making it more convenient than buses and less expensive than taxis, the aim is to improve the overall convenience of local transportation services without disrupting existing transportation systems.

時刻表 2024年7月版 大家荘 ナカカル

ドライバーの都合により遅れたり早くなる場合があります

地区	大	本	本	本	本	日	祝
海地区	9:00	9:30	9:30	9:30	9:30	9:30	9:30
海地区	11:05	11:05	11:45	11:45	11:45	11:45	11:45
海地区	13:00	13:00	13:00	13:00	13:00	13:00	13:00
海地区	14:10	14:10	14:10	14:10	14:10	14:10	14:10
海地区	15:45	15:45	15:45	15:45	15:45	15:45	15:45
地区	9:00	9:00	9:00	9:00	9:00	9:00	9:00
地区	11:00	11:00	11:00	11:00	11:00	11:00	11:00
地区	12:45	12:45	12:45	12:45	12:45	12:45	12:45
地区	13:30	-	-	-	-	13:30	13:30
地区	15:30	15:30	15:30	15:30	15:30	15:30	15:30
地区	16:30	16:30	16:30	16:30	16:30	16:30	16:30
地区	17:40	17:40	17:40	17:40	17:40	17:40	17:40
地区	18:00	-	-	-	-	18:00	18:00

Diagram: Noccacal Asahimachi Oenosh course timetable

2. Service and system design utilising existing services unique to the region

The transport service was developed by Hakuholdo Inc., with the bare minimum of necessary functions while making the most of existing regional transport services. For example, the service also uses the bus stops and tickets of community buses, and has the same operational management as the local taxi operator.

Results

1. Improved mobility and convenience for residents and a high level of service satisfaction

With approximately 500 registered members and more than 4,800 passengers in total, Noccacal Asahimachi has become well established as a means of local transportation (all figures as of September 2024). Not only do people say that transportation has become more convenient, but others also say that their lives have become more enjoyable, because with this service they are now able to go out more with friends or visit entertainment facilities outside of the city centre. Local resident drivers also get a sense of satisfaction from contributing to the community, and this might also have contributed to the revitalization of the community.

2. Praise as a pioneering example of innovation in underpopulated areas of Japan

In the fiscal year (FY) of 2023, the service received the Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications Award for the 'Excellence in

Sustainable Development in Underpopulated Areas' category. In addition, it also received considerable attention in the academic field, with articles published in the *Traffic Engineering* journal and the International Association of Traffic and Safety Sciences' *IATSS Review* journal.

3. Expansion to other local municipalities

Using this town's initiative as a model case, several other local governments have now started the Noccac service using private cars. In addition, there have been over 130 visits to Asahi Town to learn more about the service as well as more than 70 inquiries from other local governments and regional organisations regarding the service, to see if they can introduce this service adapted to fit the needs of their respective regions.

Issues, Problems and Counter Strategies

1. Building a cooperative system with transportation operators

The taxi company was initially sceptical about the use of private cars for this service, but through discussions explaining that the purpose of the service was not to replace taxis but to complement buses and improve the convenience of transportation as a whole, which would lead to promoting the use of taxis, they were able to come to an agreement to help build a cooperative system for this and outsource operational management to transportation service professionals.

2. Ensuring that there were enough local resident drivers

In the initial stage, the regional revitalisation cooperation team operated the service, but that circle gradually expanded to include community leaders and welfare committee officers mainly from neighbourhood associations. Currently, there are more than 50 active drivers, and Asahi Town is continuing to work with local organisations and companies to try to secure and retain drivers.

Future Developments (Expectations)

1. Integration and optimisation of all local transportation services

Asahi Town aims to revitalize the use of local transportation services by integrating the LINE reservation system that is used in Noccac Asahimachi to community buses and taxis.

2. Using My Number Cards to collect data and promote the use of public transportation

Currently, Asahi Town has a 'LoCoPi Asahimachi' service that allows users to earn points and make payments by simply tapping their My Number Card at various facilities around the town. Transport fares can also be paid and points can be earned by tapping the card when getting on and off. This helps to collect data to see how to further improve services and promote the use of Noccac Asahimachi.

References

Overview of the Noccac Asahimachi Service

<https://www.town.asahi.toyama.jp/soshiki/shokokanoko/kotsu/2570.html>

Overview of the Noccac Series Project

<https://www.hakuhodo.co.jp/minnadekokyo/traffic/>

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Traffic Engineering journal

July 2023 Issue (Vol. 58, No. 3)

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Meaning of Technical Terms and Coined Terms Used

- Collaborative private and paid passenger transportation service

A private and paid passenger transportation service that was made in cooperation with transportation operators was established in November 2020. Bus, taxi and other transportation companies cooperated by helping with operation management and vehicle maintenance.