

# YokoLab: A Public-Private Partnership Platform Cultivating Ambition

Yokoze Town, Saitama Prefecture



## Background

Yokoze—‘Japan’s Most Ambitious Town’—is a small town of around 7,600 people in Saitama Prefecture. Like most local authorities in Japan, its biggest issue is population decline. The population peaked at approximately 10,200 in the mid-90s. It has fallen by about 2,600 in the three decades since. Moreover, projections suggest that Yokoze’s population will further fall to two-thirds of its current size (around 5,000 people) by 2040 and to one-third (around 2,600) by 2060. If we continue doing things as we always have, we cannot change the future of the town. This sense of crisis underpins its slogan ‘Japan’s Most Ambitious Town’, as in order to change, we must try new things. In addition, with the world changing at such a tremendous pace, it is no longer possible to predict the future a decade from now.

In order to change our town’s future, we determined that we must play to our strengths to solve the town’s problems and prepare for the unpredictable future. Yokoze’s three strengths are:

- (1) **Being a small local authority** – Allows for the swift implementation of projects.
- (2) **Good access to central Tokyo** – Being 70 minutes by train allows for easy access for companies based in Tokyo.
- (3) **A strong community** – Facilitates collaboration on projects and the sharing of information.

The YokoLab Public-Private Partnership Platform (hereinafter, ‘YokoLab’) initiative was set up in 2016 to make the most of these strengths.

## Objectives

Under the motto ‘Open and Friendly’, Yokoze actively fosters connections with the outside world. The goal of YokoLab is to promote a continuous influx of people, goods, capital and knowledge from outside, stimulating revitalisation like catalysts in a chemical reaction. And precisely because the future is unpredictable, we believe that we must be ambitious and take on many challenges.

## Project Outline

YokoLab is a framework to realise projects proposed by businesses, organisations and individuals within Yokoze. For those making proposals, it addresses issues such as a lack of locations to conduct proof-of-concept tests for new services, a lack support from local authority, or difficulty getting local residents to cooperate. Anyone can submit a proposal via the town’s website. The town holds monthly review panels for the proposals submitted to YokoLab, and the results are announced within a week. The evaluation criteria include whether the project would benefit the Yokoze residents, whether it is feasible and has future potential, and the passion of the proposer. If a project is accepted, the town provides it with the necessary support. Support can take the form of the use of administrative authority, requests for cooperation from public institutions such as schools, requests for resident cooperation, and publicity or press releases from the town.

## Features and Innovations

1. Broad accessibility which allows anyone to try something out, regardless of experience, residence or industry.
2. A rapid process which takes as little as one month from application and selection to project launch.
3. Operating costs are very low as most projects have none of the town's budget allocated to them.

## Results of the Project

In the seven years since YokoLab was launched, it has received 234 proposals, of which 141 have been adopted. Moreover, it has created a virtuous cycle in which one attempt to take on a challenge leads to another. From the project goal of 'a continuous influx of people, goods, capital and knowledge', there has been a notable increase in the number of 'people' who want to take on challenges. There are even people who moved to the town as a result of YokoLab.

Furthermore, before the launch of YokoLab, the town was rarely featured in the media, whether on television, in newspapers or in magazines. However, since then, we have been featured numerous times and many people have come from across the country to observe, increasing our name recognition as a town. We also feel that our brand as 'Japan's Most Ambitious Town' is becoming more established.

## Issues, Problems and Responses

- At project launch:  
As a project revolving around intangible initiatives and untested proof of concepts, with nothing concrete to show for it, it took some time to gain the understanding of both residents and the town council.
- At present:  
Since proposals for YokoLab span a broad range of topics, relatively few address the town's issues. Another issue is increasing the number of start-ups and new businesses coming out of YokoLab.

## Future Developments (expected effects and project vision and issues)

- Implementing an Issue-Driven YokoLab:  
While maintaining the current format, we are considering introducing a format in which the town presents issues it wants addressed and calls for proposals to solve them.
- Support for Start-ups and New Businesses:  
To support start-ups and new businesses in the town coming out of YokoLab, we are exploring options such as providing financial support and establishing a start-up support framework.



YokoLab selected Proposal No. 14: Doburoku (unfiltered sake), a local specialty product born from a proposal made by local residents



YokoLab selected Proposal No. 76: Universal Baseball, which can be enjoyed by everyone regardless of age, gender or disability



Mt. Bukō, the symbol of Yokoze Town

### **Websites for Reference**

<https://www.town.yokoze.saitama.jp/>

(Yokoze Town's official site)

<https://yokolab.jp/> (YokoLab's website)

### **Contact**

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### **Meaning of Any Specialist Terms or Neologisms Used**

YokoLab: A coined term combining 'Yoko', from Yokoze Town, and 'lab', from 'collaboration' and 'laboratory'