

## **Public Transportation from Future**

From December 25, 2024, Iyotetsu Bus plans to operate a “Level 4” self-driving bus on the 1.6-kilometer round trip between Iyotetsu Takahama Station and Matsuyama Kanko Port. This is expected to be the first “Level 4” route bus operation in Japan.

It will be a completely cashless system. They hope autonomous driving becomes a solution to the labor shortage. About 60 round trips per day are currently operated in the section, and most of them will be switched to autonomous vehicles.

The bus has 12 passenger seats. A security officer will monitor the driving from an office located about 7km away. The maximum speed is 35 km/h. The president of the company said, “Although this project will be 100% supported by the national government, the burden of the project related to the system is large.” He appealed for the national government to increase the budget and move autonomous driving forward. He also said, “I want to let the world, especially children, know that an autonomous bus is running in Matsuyama.” There are five levels of autonomous driving, and “Level 4” is fully autonomous driving on a specified route.

(December 10, Ehime Shimbun)

## **25th Birthday Party for Peace the Polar Bear**

On December 7, a birthday party for Peace the polar bear was held at Tobe Zoo. About 500 visitors attended and celebrated with songs and a special cake with her favorite fruits.

The female bear was born on December 2, 1999. A zookeeper, Mr. Takaichi aged 54 now, raised her in place of her mother, which was nervous after giving birth for the first time. There was no precedent for a person to raise a polar bear, which is vulnerable to heat and bacteria, but she overcame a life-threatening condition caused by epilepsy. She weighed 680 grams at birth, and Mr. Takaichi said he was able to hold her in his hand. She has now grown to about 250 kilograms.

A crowd gathered in front of the bear cage where the birthday party was held. Peace ran up to eat a 45cm-tall special ice cake topped with 11 different toppings like fatty tuna, melon, and strawberries. Mr. Takaichi said, “I would like to keep caring for Peace, as she is getting old and there are some health concerns. I thank all the people who make her happy with their love.”

(December 8, Ehime Shimbun)

## **Memorial Service for Broken Needles**

On December 6, a memorial service to express gratitude for broken and bent needles was held at Matsuyama Designer School, where about 50 students paid tribute to 1112 needles, including sewing needles, gusset pins, and sewing machine needles. This is the 76th needle memorial service since 1946.

After the head priest from Shōshū-ji Temple chanted sutras, each student stuck a needle into konnyaku and said a prayer. Representing the students, a third-year student in the Department of Fashion Creators, expressed her gratitude to the needles she uses in her daily classes. The needles were offered

to the Shōshū-ji Temple.

(December 7, Ehime Shimbun)

Note: Needle memorial services are a custom found throughout Japan.

## **Art Festival to be Hosted by Tokyo University of the Arts and Ehime Prefecture in 2025**

Tokyo University of the Arts and Ehime Prefecture announced on November 27th that they will jointly host the inaugural art festival “art venture ehime fes 2025” in the prefecture next fall to showcase the region’s charm. The event is planned to be held every three years.

The university and the prefecture launched the “Art Venture Ehime” project last year to connect people and local communities through art and create new value. The festival will combine art with various fields such as sports, tourism, and welfare, aiming to address regional issues such as population decline.

The festival will be held from October 18 to November 3 next year. The main venue will be “Tobemori+”, a complex of four facilities including Ehime Children's Castle in Matsuyama, with additional locations in Imabari City and four other sites in the prefecture. Artists selected from an open call will exhibit works inspired by local nature and history, and conduct workshops.

Katsuhiko Hibino, President of Tokyo University of the Arts, Tokihiro Nakamura, governor of Ehime prefecture, and Takeshi Okada, president of FC Imabari, who helped connect both parties, held a press conference at the prefectural office. Hibino expressed hope that the festival would spark discussions about “what makes Ehime unique.” The prefecture is also pursuing plans to host the National Cultural Festival in 2028.

(November 28, Asahi Shimbun Digital)

**“art venture ehime fes 2025” website:**

<https://artventureehime.com/fes2025/> (only available in Japanese)

## **New Mental Health Care Ward for Children Opens**

On November 20th, Ehime Prefecture announced the establishment of a new “Child and Adolescent Ward” specializing in mental health care for junior high school students and other adolescents in the “Ehime Rehabilitation Center for Children” in Toon. The new ward will begin operations on November 25th.

The ward will treat mental health conditions such as adjustment disorders and eating disorders in upper elementary and junior high school students. Until now, the prefecture did not have any medical facilities specializing in mental health care for children and adolescents.

The three-story building will house 20 beds. Outpatient care is planned for five days a week, with three doctors, 20 nurses, and mental health and welfare workers. In a collaboration with the Toon City Board of Education, the hospital has also set up a school within the facility to accommodate long-term stays of up to three months.

Governor Tokihiro Nakamura expressed his hopes during a regular press conference, stating, “This facility will provide a safe and comfortable environment for children and families dealing with mental health issues.”

(November 21, Yomiuri Shimbun Online)